June 11, 2013

Riley: This is the Karl Rove interview as a part of the George W. Bush Oral History Project. I have already conveyed to Karl Governor [Gerald] Baliles’s greetings and gratitude. I don’t think it’s widely known, but Karl was an important advocate with the Bush Foundation on our behalf here. As you know, that foundation has just extended a certificate through the end of the project. We’re grateful for that.

You know the basic ground rules for the interview, right?

Rove: Yes.

Riley: We’re going to make a transcript of this interview. Everything is done under a strict veil of confidentiality. You look at the transcript, you control the release, and you control the contents of the interview. I’m pleased to say that we’ve got an unblemished record in maintaining confidences since the Gerald Ford administration.

Rove: Very good.

Riley: Now, when Katrina [Kuhn] 1st told me we had this time, my first inclination was to think, Great, we can start on his biography and deal with that and then work our way on to the Presidential years. I had only read bits and pieces of your memoir up until that point. Now I’ve read it and you’ve already done that.

Rove: I can skip over it.

Riley: Exactly. Well, I don’t want to skip over it entirely.

Rove: That’s the only part of the book that I had no intention of writing.

Riley: Is that right?

Rove: Yes, indeed. I got to the tail end of it and my editor—

Milkis: Your editor made you do it.

Rove: She said, “You know what? You can’t show up at the age of 22 meeting Bush.”
Perry: That’s a good editor.

Rove: So you have to write the first three chapters. Then she said, “I’ve made a helpful list of all the ugly things people have said about your childhood and your parents, so here they are. You’ve got to write about what a Rovian campaign is, chapter four.” Otherwise, I would have started with chapter five.

Riley: It was terrific and, again, unexpected.

Milkis: I really liked it.

Riley: We see bits and pieces of the memoir show up in briefing materials for other interviews, but it was the first time I’ve had a chance to sit down and start from the beginning, so it was very helpful. I’m glad you mentioned a Rovian campaign though, because that’s actually where I thought it would be useful for us to start. You outline eight hallmarks of the Rovian campaign, but we don’t really hear how you reached those conclusions. I’m assuming that, because it appears here in a book, you must have defined these things before you got to Presidential politics.

Rove: Right.

Riley: Can we start there, beginning with “the campaign must be centered on big ideas that reflect the candidate’s philosophy”? Partly, how do you come by this? And it’s also a way of my asking about your own conservatism. You talk a lot about how you become interested in politics, but a little bit less about your own political philosophy and how you develop that, so let me throw out those general things. This is very informal and conversational, so I hope you’ll let us treat it that way.

Rove: You bet.

Riley: Thanks.

Rove: The big ideas came from the experience of being involved in campaigns over the years. I saw a tendency for people who didn’t really have a clear idea of why they wanted to be what they were seeking, to come up short. For example, Clayton [Claytie] Williams in 1990; it was really never clear what he wanted to do, except he didn’t like Ann Richards. Another case was my close friend, Kay Hutchison, when she ran for Governor in 2010. Particularly in my early involvement, it struck me that people who had a bigger idea about what they wanted to be—even more of an idea about what they wanted to do than what they wanted to be—had a greater chance at success. The people who had less of an idea about what it was they were running for—I want to be that as opposed to do this—tended to come up short, more often than not.

Perry: How did you help people develop that?

Rove: Well, my view is that the higher the office, the more a campaign is akin to The Emperor’s New Clothes, and people will see you as you are. So I would tell candidates or prospective candidates, “Take a yellow pad, find a quiet day, and write down why it is you want to do this job.” They need to get at what it is that they want to achieve, what it is that they want to do, and
what it is they want to focus on, because at the end of the day, you can only give people so much. It’s got to really come from them.

It’s like Bush in ‘93 and ’94. One of the most impressive things about him as he got ready to run for Governor was that he had a fully formed idea of what he wanted most of his big priorities to be, and he had not only thought about them, but they were ingrained in him and he felt passionately about them. A couple of them were at the top of people’s agenda. Education was at the top of the agenda, and he’d given it plenty of thought over a number of years and had come to the conclusion that certain things needed to be done. We were in the midst of a big battle over school finance, which our then Governor had absented herself from. Bush knew he would have to deal with the school finance issue, but he also thought that it was obscuring what was a bigger issue, which was accountability. How do you measure for results and insist that the system serve the needs of every child? We were over here talking about property tax rates and poor districts and wealthy districts and transfers and so forth, and he said, “We’ve got to resolve that, but we’ve got to resolve the bigger issue.” He’d thought about it for a long period of time; he’d educated himself on it.

Even more interesting was his focus on juvenile justice, because he’d been involved in a series of juvenile justice programs over a number of years. He had developed a friendship with a district court judge who specialized in juvenile issues and they would meet for coffee every couple of months to talk about the issue. It was not at the top of people’s agenda, but he wanted to make the campaign in part about that. Welfare reform was the third issue. Again, since he was a young man, he had been involved in trying to confront poverty through mediating structures, through citizen-, faith-, and community-based groups, and he had thought about this a lot.

What was so impressive about this was that he came with a pretty good idea about what he wanted to make the campaign about. What he wanted help on was framing it, phrasing it, and finding the right language. The only thing he added on to his agenda—We had a big problem with trial lawyers and civil litigation, and I suggested that we do this as an outreach to small business, and of course it fit with his world view. Successful candidates like that impress upon you the good things, and losing candidates tend to impress upon you the bad things, and that’s where the big ideas came from.

Perry: Can we go back to the world view, because it seems that would correspond mostly with the big idea?

Rove: Right.

Perry: You’ve named off these three or four areas that are policy areas that the soon-to-be Governor thought carefully about, thought a long time about, and you said fit with the world view. How did you see his world view at that time?

Rove: First of all, it was different. Most Republicans, when they talk about welfare, talk about it in terms of freeloaders. We had a great United States Senator, Phil Gramm, whose campaigns I was involved in, and Phil talked about welfare from the perspective of, we’ve got people riding in the wagon and people pulling the wagon, and there are too many people in the wagon and not enough pulling the wagon.
Bush talked about it very differently. He talked about how dependency on government saps the soul and drains the spirit of our very best. He talked about welfare as a system that kept people from achieving all that they could be in life. This was a much more optimistic and inclusive and unifying view than saying the problem is we’ve got too many people who are freeloding on you and me. I thought it was a very interesting approach.

The same on education, where his concern—Most Republicans who run for office and emphasize education are far more concerned about, or at least used to be far more concerned about, what was happening in affluent white suburban districts from which they came. Bush’s attitude was that the system is failing, and it’s failing you if you’re black, if you speak Spanish at home, and you’re poor. In fact, he came up with the idea that we have a system that’s leaving children behind, from which the label No Child Left Behind came. The idea of accountability, holding the system responsible for results, comes from it failing too many people and, as a society, we couldn’t afford that; it was a conservative but compellingly compassionate view of how life ought to be.

He’s not an angry guy and he doesn’t—A lot of politicians manage by anger, and he never has. I remember the time I saw him more angry than any other time before he became President, and that was when he went to East Texas and was selling his education reforms. Some middle-aged, white teacher in a clearly African American–dominated East Texas school said, “Well, Governor, you just have to understand, some of these kids just can’t learn.” And he knew exactly what that was, which was a code word for, “I’ve got a lot of black kids; don’t expect me to get them to read.”

The same thing goes for juvenile justice reform. If you talk about crime and you’re Republican, you’re a hard-ass most of the time. You know, throw the little buggers in jail and to hell with them. Instead, he said, “We’re at risk of losing a generation of young people and we can’t afford, as a compassionate society, to do that. We have to reform the system, give them tough love. They have to have penalties; they have to be held responsible for their actions. By doing so, we’ll help them come to a life that is one of success and opportunity.” So it was much different rhetoric.

**Milkis:** It seemed to me, in reading your rhetoric, Karl, that you had a deep interest in these kinds of ideas before you really get to the campaign. You apparently had been reading a number of books about this kind of world view, and you passed some of those books on to President Bush.

**Rove:** Right.

**Milkis:** And that’s part of the framing.

**Rove:** Right, a lasting view.

**Milkis:** I get a sense from your memoir that you were thinking about the Republican Party and its path, and that it needed to undergo some changes. You even mention the party of [Abraham] Lincoln, that we have to get back.

**Rove:** Right.
Milkis: I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but this is something you had given a lot of thought to.

Rove: Yes, it was.

Milkis: It’s like, this is my candidate.

Rove: I started my consulting business in ’81, mostly as a direct-mail guy, but by ’84 I became a consultant as well. I’m doing the direct mail, but I’m also helping shape the strategy. So you do find a lot of candidates who say, “What should this be about? Please help me.”

Milkis: It sounds like a dissertation. What am I going to write my dissertation on?

Rove: Yes. You’re simultaneously trying to pry it out of them and hopefully helping them along. I was trying to figure it out and trying to pay attention. I didn’t get involved in politics because it was like a game or because it was like a family business. I came to it because I was concerned about ideas, so it did give me a chance to educate myself and then help educate my clients. The more you had to educate them, the slower they were to grasp it, the more dangerous a candidate they were. I really liked the people who were trying to sop it up and were already thinking that they needed to figure out a way to talk about this that is more compelling, and had given it some thought themselves.

Riley: Well, Karl, tell us a little bit more about your own intellectual journey. It’s clear from the book that you’re conservative, that you’re conservative from early on, but why are you conservative? What is it, which idea is it if you’re in politics? What flavor of conservatism is it that you’re finding most appealing, and which flavors are you finding less appealing?

Rove: Look, I grew up in the West. I really don’t know where my philosophical beliefs come from. They certainly are not handed down directly by my parents. As I say in the book, my dad never told me who he voted for until he was in his 70s. I mean, he was one of these reticent, Midwestern Scandinavians who just felt it was none of your business. And my mother was completely illogical, she was completely insane.

I think part of it has to be that I grew up in the West. I grew up in small towns in the Rocky Mountains in the ’50s and ’60s, and there was a Western individualism there that’s congenial to Republicans, just as it was, incidentally, congenial to being a Democrat in the 1860s and 1870s. I think every young teenage conservative goes through being semilibertarian, and it just so happened that Milton Friedman was writing and having an enormous influence then, and his books were available in cheap editions. I’ve always been a voracious reader—something that my father encouraged—and I was reading all these kind of weird books when I was very young. I put it in the book and it’s not a joke: I literally wrote my fifth-grade civics paper on the theory of dialectical materialism.

Riley: That one didn’t stick though.

Milkis: And that turned you into a conservative.

Rove: Yes, it did. I just found this whole idea that everything was anonymous and that thesis,
antithesis, synthesis, and history was moving itself out in a certain predetermined way, according
to these anonymous forces, and we had to pass through the dictatorship or the proletarian. I
mean, I found this all just to be insane. I didn’t like [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel or [Karl]
Marx; they both seemed pretty off the wall.

Riley: What about your affinity or lack of affinity for major Republican figures as you’re
coming through? Were there people, particularly at the Presidential level, that you were finding
an affinity for?

Rove: I was at an impressionable age. I remember [Dwight] Eisenhower because I was living in
Colorado and this is where he recuperated from his heart attacks, but mostly I knew that he was
the President. I remember [Richard] Nixon. My first political experience was riding my bicycle
with a Nixon bumper sticker on my basket that I somehow scored, and getting beaten up in
return.

I really liked Barry Goldwater and I can remember crying when he lost. I used to have a bottle of
AuH2O. Do you remember that he had the little cans of gold water?

Riley: Yes.

Rove: I carried it around for years in my personal possessions. It got lost, along with other
childhood items like my stamp collection and so forth. I thought Goldwater was the western
ideal.

Riley: OK.

Rove: I remember going to all of the political headquarters in 1968, because Utah was one of the
last states to have its delegate selection in what was a close race. It’s June of 1968 and there’s a
close state convention. Literally, [Ronald] Reagan flies into Salt Lake to attend the Utah
convention and takes it by storm. It was one of the last primary battleground states and it was
also—It’s hard to think about this, but Utah was a battleground on the Presidential level. The
Democrat and Republican Parties in the state had been pretty well evenly matched for the better
part of a century, in part because the Mormons divided their congregations on a certain Sunday
in the 1880s. People on one side of the aisle were Republicans and people on the other side of the
aisle were Democrats. They’d been governed by a theocratic party of Mormons and they decided
they weren’t going to get admitted to the union unless they split themselves up into Republicans
and Democrats, and they did.

I think it was Tom Korologos who used to say—or maybe it’s somebody else—the problem with
his family was that they were on the same side of the congregation as the town drunk that day.
But Utah was a battleground state. Hubert Humphrey comes to Utah in 1968. That’s where he
makes his break with Lyndon Johnson, in a speech in Salt Lake in the final weeks of the ’68
convention.

Riley: You mentioned running into George Wallace at that time.

Rove: Yes. I had a high-school teacher who really was very influential in my life, and he took us
to see George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Hubert Humphrey, all three of them. Hubert
Humphrey was a forlorn figure, Nixon was a mechanical figure, but Wallace was downright scary. I didn’t put it in the book, but I went out, in response to that, and paid something like three dollars to join the Utah Chapter of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. It was really scary. I’d never seen racial anger like that.

**Perry:** Help us to see how your mind was developing at that time about the impact that a politician has on a roomful of people. You describe so vividly in your book that experience with George Wallace, but you also said Ronald Reagan had everybody on their feet and cheering too.

**Rove:** Right.

**Perry:** Obviously, not with racial demagoguery. What were you seeing about personalities and charisma in political figures?

**Rove:** I don’t know if I learned much at the time. Looking back, I was really—I would go to these headquarters of these Republican candidates and collect all the material. I’d get all the material and just devour it. I can remember that “Rocky” [Nelson Rockefeller] had the best graphics. He really had the best, most attractive, cool materials.

**Perry:** What were they?

**Rove:** They were done by Madison Avenue guys.

**Perry:** *Mad Men.*

**Rove:** Exactly. Remember, when he runs for reelection as Governor in 1966 he has talking fish in his TV ads, talking about cleaning up the Hudson River. And so you’re 15 years old and here’s this guy running these really cool ads.

**Perry:** And that’s where you get your idea for the dancing elephants?

**Rove:** No, no, I got that from my father. My father was a fan of German Expressionists, which are these very dour and very dark—during the Weimar period in the aftermath of World War I, but they’re around before World War I. The dancing elephants came from a sketchbook of a German Expressionist, who clearly was mad. And he had these sketchbooks filled with animals, most of them obscene. My father had not shown me the obscene ones, but he’d shown me some of this guy’s work. Then I came across, when I was on the College Republican National Committee—I remember the name of it—Dover Publications had all this stuff that had gotten into the public domain. They had a clipart book of this guy’s stuff. We found the dancing elephants there and turned it into the poster.

**Perry:** But you said, for that time, it in effect went viral, that you were into multiple, multiple printings.

**Rove:** Oh, yes, multiple. In fact, people say, “I still have my framed dancing elephant poster.” I was in Sacramento about six weeks ago and a guy said, “I was active in College Republicans when you were, and I have my dancing elephant poster.” If only our overlords at the Republican National Committee knew where we’d gotten it, we would have been in real trouble. I don’t
think Bob Dole would have been happy. *Bob Dole not happy.*

**Riley:** Was Reagan somebody that was very much on your radar then?

**Rove:** Well, he was on my radar, but not as much. Nixon was a bigger figure because he won. I was 9 when he lost the first time, and 17 when he won, so he was a bigger figure than Reagan was. In fact, when I met Reagan for the first time, in 1976, I remember thinking how very old he was, and this caused me to make a classic misjudgment.

When the senior [George H. W.] Bush got ready to run for President, I remember that Mr. [James] Baker and 41 and I were talking about Reagan, and all of us were agreeing that he was way too old to become President, and that he was just ancient. I met him walking down a hallway in a hotel in Richmond. He was going to speak to the Republican Party of Virginia’s big fund-raising dinner, and Dot [Dorothy] Meldrum, who was sort of an old Republican battle-ax, about five feet four—you know, take a foam fire hose and wash her down for about an hour and she weighed a hundred pounds. She was a big Reagan person, as was Dick Obenshain, and I can remember walking with them and Reagan down this hallway, and he seemed ancient and old, and then he walked into the room and turned it on and he was charismatic and personable and really powerful. You could just see the magnetism when he wanted to turn it on, but walking down the hallway, he must have just been tired because he struck me as very old.

As I write in there [his book], I remember going to the Utah state convention in June 1968. In fact, I went to the airport and he flew in on a prop plane, one of those old United Airlines, two-propeller planes.

**Milkis:** Two-propeller plane, yes. They still fly into Charlottesville.

**Rove:** Admit it, you don’t want anything bigger coming into Charlottesville. You’re part of that “don’t extend the runway” crowd.

**Milkis:** Touché.

**Rove:** There are already too many of those outlanders coming in. But I remember going to the airport and it was a mob scene. It was really something.

**Riley:** You touch on Watergate here and a sense of betrayal. Did it cause you to recalibrate in any way your own political thinking or philosophy, other than just a sense of betrayal by this one individual?

**Milkis:** And you were at the RNC [Republican National Committee] when that was going on too.

**Rove:** Yes. I can’t remember whether I put it in the book or not, but I’ve actually come across the tracks of Donald Segretti. I don’t know if I put that in there.

**Perry:** You didn’t mention Donald Segretti.

**Rove:** As executive director of the College Republicans, I reported to RNC cochairman Anne
Armstrong, who eventually becomes like a second mother to me. She and Tobin [Armstrong] became my second parents. I gave the eulogy at her funeral. In early 1972 I got a phone call from a young kid named Bill Henderson, who was at Johns Hopkins University, and he was the campus chairman there. He’s now a lawyer in Houston. He was a Texan, but he was going to Johns Hopkins, and he called me and said, “I’ve received a weird phone call from a guy claiming to be”—such-and-such a name—“and he wants us to infiltrate the [Edmund] Muskie campaign,” I think it was. My reaction is, This is a Democrat dirty trick, and so I went up and told Chairman Armstrong, and she said, “Well, call him back and tell him to play along, and I’ll alert the Committee to Re-elect the President.” She called Jeb Magruder, who was over there at the committee. He was later indicted and found guilty of stuff, but he became an Episcopal priest, one of the key players of Watergate. He was her contact at the CREEP [Committee to Re-elect the President] headquarters. They talked and she called me back and said, “Yes, follow through. String him along and we’ll see what happens.”

Well, the guy didn’t call back. But another CR [College Republicans], the Wisconsin CR chairman at UWM [University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee], Tim Gratz, got a similar phone call, the same MO [modus operandi], and the same reaction, which I thought was interesting. I talked to Anne and she talked to Magruder again. Gratz told the fellow who had contacted him he’d meet, and set up a meeting for his parents’ house, and CREEP sent out a sort of dumpy private investigator with a camera and recording equipment to capture it. It turned out to be—Tony Ulasewicz, who is a minor figure in Watergate, and they set up the elaborate trap at Tim Gratz’s parents’ house, and the guy never shows up. Later, it comes out that this is Donald Segretti, and that he had been warned by people inside CREEP that he’d been found out in Baltimore and then he’d been found out in Wisconsin.

Riley: Exactly. So, in the aftermath of Watergate, is there a political figure in a party that you’re looking to? You’ve already said that you thought Reagan was too old.


Riley: George H. W. Bush.

Rove: Yes. He gets made RNC chairman in 1973. I’m executive director of the College Republicans until February. I leave the building as he is being ensconced on the fourth floor. Then I’m elected college chairman in July and confirmed in the position in August. I meet him in August of ’73, and by October I’m working for him. So, during this really terrible year of ’73 to ’74, as the walls are tumbling down and the roof is falling in on the GOP [“Grand Old Party”/Republican Party] and flames are singeing every Republican—

Milkis: Metaphorically speaking, just for the record.

Rove: —I’m his Special Assistant.

Riley: Right.

Milkis: You got moved out of the basement, right?

Rove: I got moved out of the basement. I got moved up to the fourth floor, but I was not at the
top of the pecking order, clearly, within that office. I was the lowest—I was underneath the receptionist and the driver, Don Rhodes. Part of the year I spent trying to rally support for Nixon, in particular southern states with moderate-to-conservative Democrats who were on the House Judiciary Committee. This was about the most appalling work a human being could have, because every time you think you’ve got some—I had to deal with a rabbi from Providence, Rhode Island, Baruch Korff, who was the big Nixon defender. I’m just all of 22 years old that year, and I’m clearly in over my head, doing things no human being should have to do. But that’s when the association with Bush began.

Riley: Right.

Milkis: And that’s where you met George W. Bush.

Rove: Yes, George W.

Milkis: Bringing him the car keys, right?

Rove: Yes, handing him the car keys. He has no recollection of me giving him the car keys.

Milkis: But you’re sure it happened.

Rove: But he has a very clear memory of the car. In fact, I have never really confronted him about it, but my sense is, from talking to his father and talking to his mother, that this is the famous weekend where he and his father almost go at it.

Riley: Oh, yes?

Milkis: Oh, really?

Rove: Yes, I think this may be it.

Riley: He’s probably set off by the car to begin with.

Rove: And if so, he was justified. The ugliest damn thing you’ve ever seen.

Milkis: I found your description of your first encounter with George W. Bush like on a movie set. He comes in, he’s wearing his flight jacket, and is charismatic.

Rove: Yes, and I’m the nerd.

Milkis: And you’re the nerd. Did you have any inclination at that point, or is this just such a short encounter that you didn’t know what to think? It’s just his son? You had no sense.

Rove: No sense.

Milkis: But you did pick up that you felt he was very charismatic.

Perry: And charming.
**Rove:** And charming, very charming.

**Perry:** In what way?

**Rove:** Look, I knew who I was. I was a complete nerd, and here’s this guy and he’s friendly. You could just tell that he had a lot of charm, and he had a lot of magnetism. It’s funny, when I’m around him now, he’s unchanged in that regard. You see him meet somebody for the first time, anybody. He runs into some server in the back of some hotel, walking down the hallway, and there’s an authenticity and a warmth there that’s revealing.

**Perry:** And you described his dad as being that way, so that when you would travel with him, you would see him talking to staff people and wait people.

**Rove:** It was a really important lesson. I’ve learned so much through my associations with them, a lot about things, but the most important things tend to be things about character. His dad taught me that they believe every person is worthy of respect. I don’t know whether it’s their faith or his formidable mother—41’s formidable mother and then 43’s [George W. Bush] formidable mother. I don’t know where it all comes from, but they’re absolutely right, and it’s a nice thing to live your life by. I also learned that people really appreciate acts of courtesy, and 41 is among the most courteous people in the world. He’s a really decent human being, a remarkably decent human being, and his son is the same way.

**Riley:** Do you share the conventional interpretation about 41 being sent to China?

**Rove:** The conventional being—?

**Riley:** Being that somebody was trying to get him out of town so that he wouldn’t be a plausible candidate.

**Rove:** Maybe, but I think, frankly, the selection of Rockefeller as Vice President had closed that off for him. I think the China thing was maybe a secondary thing, but I think also that Ford authentically liked him and trusted him. [Henry] Kissinger knew how problematic this relationship could be if it was mishandled, and they thought Bush had the temperament to do it, which he did. There was such overwhelming support on the national committee. The Nebraska national committeeman, Dick Herman, was the guy who wasquarterbacking it, but the support within the party and within the Congress was overwhelming. And the selection of Rockefeller, by whatever machinations brought that about, signaled that it was unlikely that he, Ford, would ever consider Bush as his running mate. Back then, time horizons were very small. Bush wasn’t thinking ’80; he was thinking ’76.

**Riley:** Right.

**Rove:** So no.

**Perry:** Did you see Bush 41 as Presidential timber when you first met him?

**Rove:** I’m not, at that point, qualified to judge Presidential timber.
Perry: Not as a consultant, but as a person who’s just utterly fascinated with politics and Presidents.

Rove: No. Even then, I’m not qualified. At that point, I’m 22, and I’m sitting there saying, Geez, I’m honored to be in the same room with the guy. No, I’m not. But by the time ’77 rolls around, something happens. My experience as college chairman, and then going to Virginia, gave me a confidence that I hadn’t had before. So when he said in 1977, “Come to work for me. I’m thinking about running for President. I want you to run my political action committee,” I’m not overwhelmed. It’s sort of like hey, that would be really cool to do, I’m all for you. So something happens, just the natural transition from being a punk to a near punk.

Milkis: One of the things I’ve always found really interesting about you, Karl, is unlike a lot of people—conservatives or liberals—who had their critical socialization in the ’60s, you really seemed to love political parties. I think that comes out in your discussion of Watergate, that one of the things that really aggravated you was the way CREEP set up a parallel organization to the Republican Party and sapped energy. Where did this love of political parties come from? Did it happen by accident? Was it partly from your reading about people like [William] McKinley?

Rove: I didn’t stumble across McKinley until I was 47.

Milkis: Oh, we’ll get to that later.

Rove: I don’t know. Parties struck me as sort of a team. I wasn’t a young athlete, but I understood being a member of a team, and it struck me that parties were about being teams. What particularly upset me about Nixon, in part, was that this was all about him, at the expense of others. By doing what he did, he hurt himself, but he also hurt the cause that he claimed to have devoted his life to, and put at risk the careers of people who had been loyal to him.

Part of it also may have been when I grew up. I grew up in the ’50s and ’60s, in small-town Colorado, Nevada, and Utah. Particularly Utah in the ’60s was like America 1952. But I don’t know, I just have always—I’ve been reading a lot about Thomas Collier Platt, who’s a party man.

Milkis: Oh, yes.

Rove: And can’t conceive of something happening without the concern for the party.

Milkis: Don’t mess with my ports.

Rove: Exactly.

Riley: All right, you guys don’t start talking shop.

Rove: We won’t go there.

Riley: Is it the case that you’re a Bush 41 Republican? Do you distinguish that from a Reagan Republican at this time, or is that a different kind of conservatism?
Rove: In 1977, ’78, ’79, ’80, it’s a more conventional Republican. Ironically enough, Bush is the more southern of the two, being from Texas, but he’s also the more northeastern of the two, so he’s more like an Eisenhower Republican than a Goldwater Republican. Reagan is more like a Goldwater Republican than he is an Eisenhower Republican.

Riley: Right.

Rove: But I’m not certain I’m all that aware of it at that point. My loyalty was personal, in the man and the character, and then pragmatic in the belief that Reagan was just too old to win it, which was a stupid idea.

Milkis: So it wasn’t that he was too conservative to win it, it was like most people thought, you thought, it was the age?

Rove: Right.

Riley: Are you becoming more familiar with the son during this interval?

Rove: Yes.

Riley: That’s a piece that doesn’t really appear to me. You say at one point, when you join up politically, later on, that it was a reverse of the norm. That normally people are political allies and then they become friends, but you were friends with this man.

Rove: Yes, right. Now ironically, though, I see him more often in the ’77, ’78 period than I’ve seen him in the ’73, ’74 period.

Riley: Sure.

Rove: He’s out in Midland and I’m in Houston, but he’s running for Congress and he’s coming to Houston some. Then a guy named Harry Treleaven, who is an ad guy from the east who had done Bush’s ’70 Senate campaign and is close to him personally, is doing 43’s congressional campaign. So he’s coming in and out of Houston and we’re hearing about it then. But actually, we spent more time together in the post-’80 Presidential campaign.

Riley: Right.

Rove: I see him more, and particularly in ’87, ’88 is where our friendship gels.

Riley: What about his candidacy? Is there anything you recall about his congressional candidacy?

Rove: Well, I became a minor issue in the campaign. Richard Viguerie, with whom I’ve had a long and contentious relationship, had bankrolled my opponent for college national chairman, Terry Dolan.

Milkis: Oh, that’s right.

Rove: Dolan later goes on to form the National Conservative Political Action Committee, which
is a Viguerie client. Viguerie makes tons of money off of doing the direct mail for them. But Viguerie is handling the campaign of the mayor of Odessa, Jim Reese, who’s running against Bush in the primary, and so they attack him by saying that Bush is associated with this Rockefeller Republican, Karl Rove. Nobody knows me. I’m not known in West Texas. At this point I’m a 27-year-old punk, and nobody in West Texas knows who I am, which is convenient, so that Jim Reese can say that a Rockefeller Republican is running George Bush’s campaigns. In those days, those were the swear words in West Texas. Anyway, so I become a minor issue in the campaign.

**Riley:** But then you become more personally acquainted with him later. In what context?

**Rove:** His dad is getting ready to run for President and we start talking. Bush is a consummate collector of gossip. He collects lots of information, political gossip, and filters it through and organizes it.

**Riley:** The son or the father?

**Rove:** The son. The father too, but the son is more open about it. The father’s more restrained about it, but is just as interested in salacious gossip.

**Milkis:** Salacious gossip.

**Rove:** So we start talking as his father is thinking about running for President. He, 43, was trying to take the measure of Lee Atwater, since he’ll ultimately become Lee’s overseer.

**Riley:** Right.

**Rove:** But having known how close I was to Lee, 43 and I started talking, and then just kept checking in. I had a lot of contacts around the country from my college days, and then for my political consulting business, which was increasingly outside of Texas and around the country. So in ’87 and ’88, we’re talking a lot.

**Riley:** I’ve got to ask you about Lee Atwater. You talk a little bit about it here, but I’m sure you’ve got more stories in your arsenal. Tell us about him.

**Rove:** It’s interesting. I put the big one in there [the book], which was the famous trip.

**Milkis:** That’s the first I’ve learned of the famous trip.

**Rove:** It was a lot of fun, and if you think about all those people who we met along the way who have gone on to other things or with whom we’ve stayed in close contact—

**Milkis:** It was really remarkable, the College Republicans.

**Rove:** Yes, of my era. It’s really amazing how many people I run into today from that time.

**Milkis:** You made a lot of important contacts.

**Rove:** Oh, yes. Without it the arc of my life would have been something entirely different.
Riley: Tell us about Lee.

Rove: Well, he was a very complicated person. Politically, he’s probably the most natural pol I’ve ever met, one of the two best political strategists I’ve ever met. It was partly book-learned, but mostly it was just sort of gut instinct. He really had a handle on how people felt and how to figure out what they were thinking. He was also the consummate bullshit artist. I mean, here’s a guy who literally reinvented himself. He’s a nerd in high school, decides he wants to be popular and date cute girls, so he teaches himself how to play guitar and plays beach music, then falls in love with rhythm and blues. But literally, he sets out consciously to re-create himself.

When he was my executive director, he was a great face man, he was a great front man, but one of his great talents was that he knew he was not up to detail and organization and activity, so he made certain he had a really able secretary who was. He spent all of his time chatting people up and talking on the phone and going to the right sort of intern gatherings in Washington, especially those of Senator [Strom] Thurmond. He had really funny habits. When he was nervous, he would tap his foot. So when he’d sit down, you could just tell he had something to say, and he’d say [impersonates Atwater], “Senator Thurmond has offered me the intern directorship in his office, and as you know, there are a lot of mighty fine-looking girls who come up from South Carolina for that program, and I’d like to take that job and ease my way back into South Carolina politics.”

This is about six months after he came to work for me, but I appreciated his candor. I’ve never had the idea that—I mean, change is inevitable and you want change, particularly when you’re young like that, and you want to grab it when you’ve got a shot. So we settled on a replacement, a kid from Kentucky named Kelly Sinclair. When Kelly came to work, I remember that we spent the morning talking about things in the office, how they operated, and Lee said, “Kelly and I ought to have lunch together, boss. You just let us talk.” So they went to lunch, and Lee left the lunch to go to Senator Thurmond’s office, unbeknownst to us, and never came back again. That was Lee, and you had to take Lee on that basis. He had made a determination that Kelly was up to the job and he didn’t need to spend two weeks more there, and he was off to his new job.

We remained friends. In fact, he was in Austin just before he had the seizure at the Phil Gramm fund-raiser in Washington. He’d find every excuse in the world to come to Austin as RNC chairman, though there was no Republican Party there to speak of. He would come there because there was a classic R&B [rhythm and blues] club, Antone’s, that would let him play.

Riley: Oh, yes?

Rove: Yes. This was apparently a good stop on the old R&B trail because they’d have all these old southern R&B artists come through. And he’d show up and jam with B. B. King or whoever.

Milkis: You’re kidding?

Rove: Antone’s Nightclub. [Clifford] Antone went to jail eventually for cocaine trafficking, but in his heyday this was Lee’s favorite excuse to come to Austin, to go to Antone’s and jam.

Riley: Did he have any blind spots politically?
Rove: His prime years were the years where his skills were best deployed because he was an intuitive politician. I’m not certain how he would have adjusted to the world of Twitter and microtargeting and cable TV. He was a guy who was—His insights into the 1988 Presidential race, that the Willie Horton thing bespoke a deeper philosophical weakness in [Michael] Dukakis that could be exploited, was a masterstroke. The famous story—and I’ve never figured out whether it’s true or not—was that he discovered the power of this while he was out at Luray Caverns one weekend the summer of ’88, talking to bikers out for a weekend ride, and having his own personal focus group.

Milkis: Guys on Harleys, a Harley focus group.

Rove: The Harley focus group. But Lee was a really intuitive political figure. He and Bob Teeter, a superb pollster and strategist, both had the same strength, which was they could read data really well. But both—especially Lee—had an intuitive sense of what worked and didn’t work, what was important and what was not important, and when it was that you needed to deploy it. If Bush had deployed, you know, letting murderers out of jail on weekend passes in July or June, it might not have worked as well as it did in September and October. And between Lee’s seizing the issue and Roger Ailes wisely saying, OK, we’re going to use this, but we’re going to shoot it so it’s a blue-gray color so nobody can figure out what race those silhouettes are.

Milkis: Silhouettes. I was just trying to come with the word.

Rove: It was shot using a revolving gate at Utah State Prison, at Logan, Utah.

Milkis: That came out after the other group, the outside group.

Rove: I think Larry McCarthy did that ad, which was not really widely seen. It was like an $8,000 buy, whereas the official campaign commercial was—

Milkis: Although it was projected quite widely.

Riley: Is it your judgment that if Lee had lived, that he would have made a difference in anything?

Rove: Yes. I think if Lee had lived, 41 would have been reelected and 43’s rise would have been impossible.

Milkis: Because of his political feel?

Rove: Lee’s political feel would have caused him to say, in ’91, you’ve got to be careful about this, and he would have. Even if Bush 41 had said I’m going forward with this, he would have found a way to better handle the campaign than it ultimately was handled. Talk about a dysfunctional campaign. In preparing for 2004, I went back and talked to [Michael] Deaver and Baker and everybody else who played a significant role in the reelect campaign, and the ’91, ’92 Bush effort is too late, too disorganized, no clarity of structure, no clarity of message, and a candidate who allowed himself to come across as distant and disinterested. The campaign ill-served the man.
Milkis: Did he also help Bush through certain policy battles? He got sick before the tax thing was resolved, right?

Rove: Right.

Milkis: So had he been there, do you think they would better—or was that just a no-win situation?

Rove: I think it was going to be what it was going to be. The question was, would they have handled the aftermath of it better, and could Lee have soothe some feelings about it? [Newt] Gingrich would have been Gingrich, but could they have done something to handle it? It’s never been clear to me how much policy role Lee had or wanted. I happened to be in Washington seeing 43 just weeks after the ’88 election, and it was the day that they were going to announce Lee as the Republican national chairman, which he had wanted forever. From the days that he was the CRNC [College Republican national chairman], he wanted to be national chairman. It had been leaked to the Boston Herald, and it was pretty clear that Lee had leaked it, and 43 said, basically, play along, because we got word that Atwater needed to come and see him. And Atwater came in and you could just tell, I mean the foot was going like this, and it he was just like, “Now, W., I know they’re probably going to say it over there, but I didn’t leak it, I didn’t leak it.” And of course he had. Bush sort of jerked him around a little bit and then said, “Don’t worry. Dad says OK; I’ve already talked to him.” But Atwater is very nervous and agitated. He wanted to be RNC chair. He didn’t want to go to the White House.

Milkis: Why do you think?

Rove: I have no idea.

Riley: Did that experience have any effect later on, when you’re trying to make a decision about which way you’re going to go, when you go in? Or did you just always assume you were going in?

Rove: No, no. In fact, as I say in the book, I didn’t think I would go. When you’re involved in a Presidential campaign, particularly when you’re a frontrunner and particularly after the primaries, people can’t help but think about the White House experience.

Riley: Sure.

Rove: And I can remember being literally horrified when Andy Card told me that the first meeting he went to at the White House, he walked into the Roosevelt Room and the woman holding the clipboard with a seating chart said, “Are you a Baker person or a [Edwin] Meese person?” Because they were so furious at each other that they seated them on opposite sides of the table. Everybody I talked to who had worked—Anne Armstrong, Marty Anderson, I mean everybody who I talked to who worked in a White House, going back to Nixon/Ford, told me something similar. I don’t know if you ever ran across Charlie McWhorter.

Milkis: I’ve never met him, but I’ve read about him.

Rove: Charlie, who as a young man had been Nixon’s aide, his Vice Presidential aide when there
was only one Vice Presidential aide, apparently, in the ’50s, told me, “If you ever get a chance to do it, take it. It will be the best job you’ll have and it will also be the worst. The backbiting, the egos, the backstabbing is really incredible, but take it, take it and endure it, because it will be the greatest experience of your life.” And so, I’m OK at campaigns, I’m really not good at internecine warfare, so I did not go into the Presidential campaign sculpting a future at the White House.

Riley: All right, I don’t want to get too far down. Actually, there are a couple of things. Let’s back up, and tell us a little bit more about your experience with W., and how that’s beginning to emerge as you’re getting ready for the campaign and through the course.

Perry: Just to back up from what Russell said, you used the term at one point, we kind of slipped over it, but you said, “our friendship began to gel.” What does that mean?

Rove: We’d talk in ’87, ’88, and he’d share confidences and I’d obviously share confidences. Then, in ’89 and ’90, he started thinking about whether or not he ought to run for Governor in the ’90 race. My advice was, you can have the nomination and it will be an open seat. It’s a Republican state and you’ll inherit half of your father’s friends and all of his enemies, and they will come after you to get him. So, even though it’s a Republican-leaning state and you could probably win, they will do everything they can to embarrass your father by coming after you. At the end of the day, I think those were his instincts too, and the fact that I was willing to—I think, and I can’t speak to it, but I think the fact that I was willing to say the hard truth that he was himself coming to the conclusion of, sort of solidified that I was going to be somebody who’d shoot straight with him, and not just about his father but about his own circumstances. Everybody else was like, “Run, run, run!” And it was not the right thing to do.

Ironically enough, his father’s defeat in ’92 made it possible for him to run and win the Governorship unencumbered. His father, by 1994, is a popular figure again in Texas. He left the White House relatively popular, but he becomes even more popular, and the dynamic is entirely different than it would have been in 1990. But 43 clearly has a future and we’re talking a lot of politics, and he’s calling for gossip. What’s going on in this race? What’s happening with Claytie? What’s happening with other rising stars? I don’t know if he’s ever going to run, but I’m saying So-and-So, and would you be willing to help Florence Shapiro, who’s running for the state senate in Collin County? I’m helping him, unconsciously, build up some credits with people that he gets to cash in, in ’93 and ’94, when he decides to run.

Riley: And Karl, during the course of 41’s Presidency, you’re talking with him also about what’s happening in Washington? Is he bouncing ideas off of you in frustration?

Rove: Yes, but not as much. He’s clearly frustrated with the quality of the 1992 campaign and unable to do much about it, unlike in ’87, ’88, when he and Laura [Bush] picked up and moved to Washington. Now he’s got his own business career. He’s in the oil business, he’s got investors he’s got to deliver for, and he’s trying to buy the [Texas] Rangers, which is an arduous task. Its owner, Eddie Chiles, is in declining health and surrounded by financial advisors who are all jockeying. Once 43 can get a deal done with Eddie, somebody will step in and redo the deal up so they can get another fee or add somebody onto the tab. So it turns into a very complicated thing to both buy the Rangers and then to get the approval of Major League Baseball to buy it, so
Bush is not in a place where he can take an active role in his father’s reelection campaign.

**Riley:** Do you have any piece of that, talking with him about the Rangers business too?

**Rove:** No, I’m just aware of it. But no, I’m not—

**Riley:** You said you’re not a sports guy.

**Rove:** I’m not a sports guy, nor am I a finance guy. I can read a P&L [profit-and-loss statement], but I can’t talk Wall Street language.

**Milkis:** So you know that was the best job in the world, to own a baseball team.

**Riley:** I want to get back to this because one of the pieces of leftover business, when we were talking about the Rovian way, a lot of that is about data, about your engagement in technologies and so forth.

**Rove:** Right.

**Riley:** Tell us about that, because your direct-mail work is pretty cutting edge, isn’t it? There weren’t a lot of people doing direct mail at that time.

**Rove:** Well, there were a lot of people doing it, but they weren’t doing it with such an emphasis on technology. The only way I could compete with the big boys was to be about two steps beyond them from a technological perspective.

**Milkis:** By sophisticated modeling.

**Rove:** Yes, and it’s not very—The first model we do is 1986, Kit Bond’s Senate race. We do the first vaguely sophisticated microtargeting. We called every single voter in the state of Missouri who’s not a Republican or Democrat primary voter, and we even called Democratic primary voters in certain blue-collar areas in St. Louis and Kansas City: “What do you think the number one function of government is?” And we gave them six options: promoting a free enterprise system, regulating the economy so everyone has a fair shot, protecting personal liberties, helping the poor, providing for a strong national defense, and promoting traditional values. “What do you think the second function of the government is?” And we’d give them the same list, randomized. So, if somebody says my number one function is strong traditional values and number two is a free enterprise system, then they are a social conservative. If it’s reversed, they’re an economic conservative. If they help the poor and protect personal liberties, then they were liberals. We could cherry-pick the blue-collar types, who were populist on economics but favored strong national defense or traditional and conservative values. After categorizing everybody in the state, we targeted them accordingly. Deploying technology like this was the only way I could compete.

**Milkis:** How did you come to that? Where did that come from, this interest in modeling and the social—?

**Rove:** Well, because I understood voters were different and the question in every campaign is,
who can you get to vote for you, and particularly, who it is that you, if you don’t do something—
Who’s available to you, but only if you make a special effort? You know, who’s persuadable?
who’s up for grabs? A swing voter, a ticket splitter, we had lots of different labels we were
applying back then. But I knew you couldn’t win by just turning out the base. I mean, we were
the minority party. This is the ’70s and ’80s; we were lucky to be alive at the end of the ’70s.

Riley: And whose work were you building on? You said there were big boys out there.

Rove: I had competitors here in Washington, most of whom were like Richard Viguerie and
some various sundry firms. Viguerie was not real competition, though, because he had largely
gotten out of the campaign business and into the lucrative business of creating organizations like
NCPAC [National Conservative Political Action Committee] and then using direct mail to fund-
raise for it.

Riley: So, the direct-mail stuff that you were doing was more conventional for the time than the
survey?

Rove: No, it was unconventional. We had better ability to do computer work that other firms
were slow to adapt, and that allowed us to do segmentation, to target messages to specific target
audiences. We also turned out a superior product, with attractive graphics and copy. We could
compete on price and deliver a better product, and technology was the way to do better. For
example, it was then standard to label your fund-raising response reply card. We had computer
printers that allowed us to personalize letters and an accompanying reply form that had your
name and address and your source code on there. It also had a key code, so rather than having to
type in the name and the address into the database, all you had to do was access that code
number. And it was personalized, so that if you’ve got a history of giving $500 gifts, we ask you
for $1,000 or $500. If you gave a $100 gift, we ask you for $250 or $100. It was much better
than a label with a whole bunch of preprinted gift options.

It generated a higher average contribution and costs were roughly the same, and yet clients got a
lot more money for each dollar they spent. We did a lot of testing and were very data driven and
we were able to make it transparent to our clients, and I didn’t understand until much later how
important that was. We made it so clients would fill out a little sheet with the day’s tallies, and in
return, we would send them a report every week, showing how every mailing and every list was
doing.

Before fax machines really became widespread, we went out and bought Qwip machines from
Exxon Office Systems. They had these old prefix fax machines, using 1920s technology. They
had a stylus that burned in a special piece of chemically treated paper. You put the phone into an
acoustical coupler to establish a connection. So we would send these units to our clients for the
course of the campaign, and that way we could transmit them copy. We’d call them up and say
plug the phone in, and we’d hit the button and it would spin the copy, so we didn’t have to send
by FedEx or mail.

Also, it allowed us to send them the reports. By the ’90s very early on, we got it so they could
log on to a site and enter their own daily tallies for fund-raising. That would immediately update
the database and pop up their reports, so they could see how things were going every day. I think
I bought Rove.com around 1989. I’ve had the same email address since the early nineties, since DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] was still running.

**Riley:** All right, Texas. We’ve got to get you into Texas. You’ve been consulting with George W. Bush about running and he decides to run.

**Rove:** Right.

**Riley:** What’s your role going to be in the campaign?

**Rove:** Well, mad scientist. I’m going to be the general consultant and handle the direct mail, so the first thing we do is piece together the organization, the staff, and so forth. We have a very ragged primary. We have a campaign manager who had done a marvelous job in his previous race, but was in the wrong role in the primary. He’s a fine man, but could not make a decision. Bush is used to aligning authority with responsibility, saying, “Here’s the goal. You figure out how to do it and move. Tell me how you’re doing it and that you’re meeting your marks, but go do it.” And this guy just could not go do it, but that didn’t matter. There was no serious opposition for the Republican primary, because Bush, by force of personality, convinced everyone to stay out and give him a clear shot to beat Ann Richards.

**Milkis:** She’s a pretty formidable incumbent.

**Rove:** Really formidable.

**Milkis:** Kind of a star.

**Rove:** Oh, yes, a rock star, and a very adept campaigner. Bush had the most important insight, which is, “We’ll never attack her.” He would say, “We can do better. I think our state has not addressed this problem. Texas needs to deal with this issue,” but his attitude was, we have a limited amount of time to build ourselves up and take advantage of every moment to do that rather than attacking her.

**Riley:** How do you explain that? Here’s a guy whose father has been very publicly, verbally abused by this woman. You would think he’d want to rip her limb from limb.

**Milkis:** You think this is a redemption candidate in some ways.

**Riley:** Yes, exactly.

**Rove:** Well, everybody wanted to make it that. Again, that goes back to, is the big idea that I want to redeem my family because she said ugly things about my dad? Or is it that our state faces big challenges, too many kids are not learning to read, we’re at the risk of losing a generation, we have too much dependency on government that’s sapping the soul and draining the spirit, and our small-business people are drowning under a sea of junk lawsuits? What’s a more compelling vision? Pay her back for having said my dad was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, which was a very funny line, frankly; stolen, but a very funny line. Or talk about important things people care about?
Milkis: Do you think she, like a lot of people, underestimated him?

Rove: Terribly underestimated him.

Milkis: You anticipated my question.

Rove: Yes, terribly underestimated him.

Milkis: A lot of people have underestimated George W. Bush.

Rove: But even more than that is that she terribly misread that state’s attitude. She went out to San Francisco to a trial lawyers convention and called him “that Bush boy.” That was like hey, everybody laughed at the comment at the Democratic National Convention, so if I belittle him, they’ll laugh along with me. The contrast was stark. He’s out there talking about things people care about and she’s out there throwing slurs. Then when she goes to East Texas in September and calls him a “jerk,” that’s a key moment, because his response was to say, “I haven’t been called that since the seventh grade, and insults like that aren’t going to solve the big issues facing our state, which are making certain that every child learns to read, saving a generation of young people from a life of crime, ending dependency on government, and stopping the junk lawsuits that are keeping us from creating jobs.” It was like bam!

Then also, the famous killdeer incident had a big impact, because it showed—Her attitude toward good old boys was condescending. She felt she needed to placate “Bubba” by every September first going dove hunting in East Texas, outside of Dallas. Of course, she was not a hunter, she could care less, but it was a nice show and she’d get a nice picture for the newspapers. Bush went dove hunting and shot a protected bird, a killdeer, and when he discovered that he had done so, after a sharp-eyed television sports reporter noticed that the white markings on the bird meant that it was a killdeer, Bush’s response was not to deny it, but to dispatch a young aide to the game warden’s office to pay the fine immediately.

Milkis: That’s a great story, yes.

Rove: It was a classic moment because everybody—and I have to admit, I’m one of them who felt sick to my stomach when I heard.

Milkis: He wasn’t a hunter either, right?

Rove: He’s a hunter, but it’s not at the top of his interests.

Riley: Where did you learn to hunt, out west?

Rove: No, South Texas, Tobin and Anne [Armstrong].

Riley: When you went down there?

Rove: Yes. The first time was 1979, when Tobin and Anne invited me to go hunting. I’d hunted a little bit, rabbits and stuff, but not birds. When Tobin was dying, he called my best friend, Pat [Charles Patrick] Oles, who’s like a son to him, and said, “I want you and Karl to put together a
group of guys and I’ll give you the first lease on the Armstrong Ranch.” And we still have it, 11,000 acres. It’s really a lot of fun.

Riley: Is that where [Richard B.] Cheney had his incident?

Rove: On my lease, and that was my lawyer. I was shocked that fact never came out. If you go back to incorporation papers of Rove and Company in 1981, my lawyer, the secretary/treasurer of my corporation, and my landlord is Harry M. Whittington Jr., and that’s the guy Cheney shot. The press corps never figured it out, but could you imagine the headline in the Washington Post? “Cheney Shoots Rove’s Lawyer in Sign of West Wing Tension.”

Riley: Did you get a funny feeling in your stomach when you got that news?

Rove: We could not get Cheney to make it public, and we needed to. It took until the next morning, before Cheney allowed Katharine Armstrong to feed the news to a reporter at the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. The White House press corps was furious with us for having hid this fact from the afternoon and to the next morning.

Riley: We’ve got a long way to get there. Texas.

Milkis: Let’s get back to the campaign.

Riley: The campaign. Is there anything else that we need to cover there?

Milkis: Let me just ask a really general question. I think it’s really interesting to look at Governors’ campaigns, and then the individual becomes President, like FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt].

Rove: Right.

Milkis: And that seemed to be a really signature Bush campaign. So what lessons did you draw from that campaign that served you well later on, serving President Bush?

Rove: We really needed to focus on why it was he would run for President. We needed to do a much better job of organizing it from the get-go so it would achieve the goals necessary. It also bespoke of an enormous ability to raise funds. We weren’t thinking about running for President in ’94.

Milkis: Of course not.

Rove: But we started to think that way after the ’96 election. One of the things that was clear was that he had the ability to draw lots of money from a wide range of fund-raisers and sources, like his father did. When his father ran for President, he had the Yale network, he had the eastern network, he had the Texas network, and then he had his congressional contacts. Similarly, 43 had his Yale connections, his baseball work, the oil patch, Texas, and then his father’s friends. So all of that really did point out that in a difficult race like this, you had to have a compelling vision that allowed you to make inroads in places where Republicans normally didn’t get the vote, and you needed to have a united party, which we were lucky to have in ’94 and hoped to have in ’98.
Then we ran for President.

Milkis: Which issue do you think resonated most as the best in that 1998 reelection campaign?

Rove: Education, and that was both a temporary and a secular problem. If you look at the Republican vote in 1990, Ann Richards does better than a Democrat should in the Republican suburbs, and she’s getting not only women’s votes but men’s votes, because Claytie Williams was coming across as simply something that they couldn’t relate to. These were suburbanites, not West Texans. Education allowed 43 to bring those votes back, but it also allowed him to do well in Latino communities, where it was a huge issue. And the way that he talked about welfare and the way that he talked about juvenile justice, as well as education, allowed him to make inroads into poorer communities and to mitigate the animosity in the African American community.

Milkis: What percent of the Hispanic vote did he win in that election? I guess we could just look that up, but I’m just curious.

Rove: I want to say 35 or 40 percent in 1994.

Milkis: So it really anticipated how well he could do with the Hispanic vote, yes.

Rove: We won a majority of the Hispanic vote in the ’98 reelection.

Milkis: So in this race you really got to road test these ideas of compassionate conservatism that you had been developing. You beat a powerful incumbent with this.

Rove: There’s one other—I left his name out of this, but when I’m back—So I’m 20 and at the College Republicans, the American Enterprise Institute puts me on their mailing list and gives me all of their publications and says they will mail them to any chapter that we want. So I read Michael Novak’s essay on mediating structures, which just blew me away. Then, ironically enough, Michael and I become friends in 1989 and ’90, when I go on the board for International Broadcasting. And so I’m feeding Novak’s writings to 43, as well as Marvin O’Laskey’s work. That really becomes the heart of, as Bush coined the term “compassionate conservatism.”

Perry: What strengths and weaknesses are you seeing in Governor Bush now, in that first campaign? We’ve talked about the strengths of not going negative and having the big ideas and taking two or three issues. What other strengths? But also, are you seeing any weaknesses that you know you want to work on as time goes on?

Rove: He’s an unbelievable manager, which in politics means a strong leader. I’ve read Peter Drucker a lot, but I’d never seen it in action until I saw Bush. This idea of aligning authority and responsibility and holding people accountable for results, encouraging people, these come naturally to him. Maybe it’s ingrained in him. Maybe he picked it up at Harvard Business School. But he has this ability to lead and to lead an organization, to establish a tone, to set a goal, to keep the focus, to encourage people and to let them go execute. It was really amazing to see him, first as a candidate and then as Governor. In the campaign, not only the candidate but as the leader of the campaign, and then to see him as Governor. It was just mind-boggling.

He walked into office knowing he needed to have a good working relationship with Democrat
Speaker Pete [James E.] Laney and with Democrat Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock, which could have easily gone wrong. I saw it go wrong with Bill Clements, who had a contentious relationship with Bullock. Laney was much more problematic for Bush in some ways; he was a really fine man, but the Republicans went from being a small minority to being a significant minority, and Laney had a very contentious relationship with him, and yet Bush managed to bond with Laney.

Bullock in particular, because Bullock is one of the most complicated people I’ve ever seen in politics. Early in 1985, Bullock is about this far away from concluding Bush is nothing but Ann Richards in pants, a lightweight who’s interested in the headlines. Bush makes a mistake of telling the press what the three men have decided in a private breakfast. Bullock is concerned Bush is a press hound and vows to take revenge on one of the new Governor’s key legislative initiatives. Bush beats Bullock easily. He instinctively [snaps fingers] understands how problematic this is and immediately goes to see Bullock and apologizes, saying “I heard you’re upset and you have every reason to be upset. I screwed up.” Bullock is completely blown away. Politicians don’t do that. Leaders do, but politicians don’t come in and say, “Hey, I screwed up. I got it.”

Of course Bush started his apology by kissing Bullock on the lips, because before you screw me you gotta kiss me. Pete Laney, to this day, if someone talks about it, he just starts laughing because it was so—Bullock apparently was completely discombobulated by it, because it was the kind of thing that he would have liked to have done but never found a moment to do it. I think Bush’s apology and the outrageous way he did it was the moment Bullock began to think, I can do business with him. It became a very close and important relationship.

Bullock scared people for two decades. I had a friend, Reggie Bashur, who has since passed, unfortunately. He had terrible brain cancer. He was a big lumbering guy, fearless. Bullock hired him. Reggie was a Republican, but Bullock hired him, and he lasted a week. He said, “I couldn’t take the pressure.” He said Bullock would summon people; people would get a page saying Bullock wants to see you, and they would jump up out of their chairs and run out of the room to see Bullock. And here’s Bush handling this contentious personality, and it just blew me away.

Now look, we all have weaknesses, and he didn’t have a lot, but it was clear that there was a difference once Karen Hughes came aboard. She was not there in the primary, but in the general election she came into the campaign. Bush had a tendency to say things that didn’t hit right. Once, he got into the habit of calling himself a capitalist, and Karen Hughes said, “Don’t you ever say that word again.” He sometimes had a great ear for feeling about these issues, but occasionally he could do better in finding the right word to say it. But he was really smart. He’s a quick learner and got into the pattern of thinking, What’s the best way to say that offhand thing?

Milkis: Talk a little bit about your relationship with Karen Hughes. It’s an interesting relationship; you’re both very different.

Rove: Yes, the High Prophet. Karen’s maiden name was Parfitt, so we all called her the High Prophet.

Milkis: She is tall.
Rove: She is tall, and she’s really smart and has a really good feel for how things are going to be perceived and played out. We’re friends, and there’s something about communicators. Communicators are thinking constantly about How do we position this? Particularly in the White House, I found myself on the opposite side of the communicators because I was more concerned about getting the policy right and they were focused on how do we get the policy explained right.

Milkis: Yes.

Rove: I have enormous respect for her, and Bush’s success would have been impossible without her. She really was particularly good at batting back the assaults from the Richards campaign in a way that helped Bush to rise above it. In the Presidential campaign, she would get stuck on a really good idea and made certain we all did too. After the New Hampshire election, we needed to give substance to the idea of Bush, and she was the one who picked up an old slogan that we had tossed around and made us all swallow it and eat it whole, “Reformer with Results.” It was corny and it was not durable, but it lasted for the better part of 19 days, and that’s all we needed.

Riley: I want to go back and ask one follow-up question about Bullock. Did his experience with Bullock in Texas in any way miscue him when he comes to Washington and is dealing with a different kind of government?

Rove: Yes, it does, in a way. It may be. It certainly put Bush in the mindset that he could develop relationships with congressional Democrats, but I think it’s an overstatement to say that he felt that everybody could be like Bullock. He was sophisticated enough to know that there would be different creatures in Washington, but on the other hand, it made him absolutely stubborn about the idea that he needed to try. This was a deliberate effort in the 2000 campaign, to say we were not Gingrich Republicans. This was not going to be [William J.] Clinton-Gingrich animosity, it was that we’re going to try to bring the country together.

In the White House the senior staff all get apportioned out to relationships with Members of the Congress, particularly Senators. There are not enough legislative affairs people, so they literally keep an informal list of who knows what Senator or major House player so they feel they can call you and be communicating with the President. I had to deal with Harry Reid because part of my childhood was in Nevada. Reid had come to feel that he could pick up the phone and say something to me and that it would be said to the President. So he’d call me and say, “I’ve just finished giving a speech and I didn’t read it in advance, and I called the President a liar and a loser. They didn’t tell me they were writing it and putting it in there. I didn’t mean to call him a loser; I meant to call him a liar. So, will you tell the President I’m sorry?” I’d be steamed about it and Bush would never be. It was like OK, I know they’ve got to do that.

I was there when his first instinct was he needed to reach out to Democrats. It was December 14, 2000, the day after he’d given the acceptance speech at the state capitol, after the Supreme Court decision, and the next morning he said, “I want to call Ted Kennedy.” And he talks to Kennedy before he talks to Trent Lott. We deliberately made George Miller, the ranking Democrat on Health, Education and Labor, the first House member that he met with. We found out Miller was flying from California back to Washington, and Bush said, “See if he’ll come and see me on his way back.” He came to Austin on the way to Washington. Bush said, “I saw what you said about education and an accountability system and I know you’ve had the courage to take on the unions
on accountability. I want to be your partner in this effort, and I hope you’ll be mine.” While he didn’t have expectations, others of us did have expectations that the magic that he worked with Bullock could work in Washington, but it was a different kind of Democrat and a different situation.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Rove:** I think the one thing is, that did at least lift me, and I had the sense—I can’t speak for him, but I think it had the sense for him too. Bullock was strong, Laney was strong, and Reid was weak, and [Richard] Gephardt wasn’t willing to be strong. I think Bush regretted not having strong partners because—Look, Bullock and he didn’t agree on everything. Bullock did not agree at all when we had the votes to pass medical liability reform in the House, and enough votes that it could pass in the Senate. Bullock was not in favor of a cap on pain and suffering, but we ended up arriving at a deal with him. It was because he respected the will of the Senate, and was strong enough to say they’re entitled to their opinion and even stronger enough to say I’ve got a different opinion but I’m going to use my power to temper their opinion. And we didn’t have that, particularly in Reid, who was a completely undependable person.

**Milkis:** So he would have preferred strong party leaders, like a George Mitchell, or a Tip [Thomas P.] O’Neill would have been more suited to his—

**Rove:** Mitchell was not a guy that he trusted because of how he had screwed his father. Mitchell did not live up to the agreements that he made at Andrews Air Force Base. But an O’Neill, yes; someone who could give his word and stick by it.

**Perry:** Is that part of the relationship with Kennedy, then, that he feels that Ted Kennedy is that kind of person?

**Rove:** Kennedy can divorce the issues where he agrees with you from those where he disagrees with you, and Bush had read enough about Kennedy and knew enough about Kennedy’s views to know that he could be brought aboard on an accountability system as well. Kennedy had taken on the teachers’ union some and over an accountability system that measured progress; otherwise, you didn’t know whether or not the schools were achieving their goals. And a key phrase with both Miller and Kennedy was “disaggregation of the data.” Both of them had used that phrase. In the education reform movement this was low key, but a dead giveaway. If you said “disaggregation of data,” you knew the system was failing black kids, poor kids, Latino kids, rural kids, and hiding failure by aggregating all of the results. So when they said “disaggregation of data,” Bush knew they could be his allies.

**Riley:** Karl, I wonder if I could get you to comment a little bit more on the point that you just made about Kennedy, where you said he would agree with you in the area where he would agree with you without allowing it to affect—

**Rove:** Kennedy and Bush both had that ability.

**Riley:** Right. Is that a function of Kennedy’s temperament or is it a function of his unique electoral status as a Kennedy?
Rove: It’s not that. Effective legislators are like that. Miller was that way. I don’t think there’s a single thing George Miller agreed with Bush on other than education reform. Kennedy was out there beating our brains in on the Iraq War, particularly in ’06 and ’07. But on the other hand, Kennedy was a master legislator, and so was Joe Lieberman. When it came to Homeland Security, you could sit in a room and wrestle through the details of, for instance, Section 702 of the Patriot Act with Joe Lieberman, and know that at the end of the day, you’d come to an agreement and neither one of you would get everything you wanted, but you could shake hands and know that it would happen.

Riley: Why are those so rare, or are they rare? Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions.

Rove: I don’t know. I don’t know if they’re rare or not. That’s worthy of a Sid Milkis book or two. My sense is Presidential leadership matters. I think there are a lot of legislators who want to find answers, but if you’ve got Clinton focused on trying to survive the impeachment and recover his stature, then there’s no leadership.

I used to be the hothead. I’d go into the Oval Office and read some comment in the morning, or have a phone call from Harry Reid, and there would be steam coming out of my ears. Bush would say, “Get over it. History will get it right and we’ll both be dead.” I think he enjoyed saying it, but he was right.

Milkis: He obviously had read [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel. He knew this was going to work out in history. You must have given him the philosophy of history.

Rove: Yes, I gave him my fifth-grade paper. Seriously, Bush didn’t take it personally. There were obviously some comments that he took personally, and some particularly from his own party that he thought were jackasses, but he just didn’t let it interfere. I learned something when I listened to the Lyndon Johnson tapes.

Milkis: We have those.

Rove: My view of Richard Russell is entirely different after listening to those tapes. I thought he was a get-along, go-along Southern segregationist. Instead, he’s the one guy who says to Johnson everything he believes, no matter how difficult it is for the President to swallow. And whether he’s right or wrong, he shoots straight with the President. You could do business with somebody who will shoot straight and be focused on trying to get something done.

Riley: One other point from earlier that I wanted to probe you about, and that was that you’d said that you had the advantage of a unified party going into 2000. I have two subquestions. One is the external perception: Is part of the existence of the unity because of what you guys had done in the four or five years before? In other words, sort of fending off opposition by creating a juggernaut of a campaign?

Rove: Right. Yes, that’s part of it. We wanted to make the—

Milkis: The grand plan.

Rove: Inevitability is not exactly it, because inevitability—Hillary Clinton ran a campaign of
inevitability: I deserve this, it’s mine, it’s my turn. It’s not that it was just naturally his by right of succession, but we wanted people to say he’s going to be the guy because he’s doing all the right things. He’s got a compelling message, a big organization with lots of people, an energy level that gives me confidence he’ll run a strong campaign. He’s handling himself well; he’s raising a lot of money. The money thing became an easy mark, simply because you have to have a report. Our first report in California, for June 30, 1999, was so jaw-dropping it helped a lot. That matters some, but I think just simply the fact that we had a new message of what he wanted to do and as broad an organization as we did, with a place for everybody who wanted to have a place and something for them to do, were both equally important.

Riley: The other piece of this was, in the book you indicate that the Republican revolution in ’94 is a plus for you in the sense that it shows that the trends of history are sort of moving in your direction. I’m wondering if another interpretation isn’t that it created a peril for you in the sense that there is now a competing locus of public attention on Republicans in Washington, particularly since there are so many Texans involved in that leadership.

Rove: Yes. I’m not worried about the Texans, and I’m not really worried about the competing voices in ’99 and 2000, because the nature of it is that when you’re out of power, the congressional voices are louder than when you have a Presidential candidate. But what was a problem was the whole Washington scene. We had a toxic environment, where the things that were routinely said by the President and the Speaker of the House about each other created a poisonous atmosphere, and people were sick of it. They wanted the country to be brought together. They wanted a President who would be able to lead the country, and they blamed Republicans and Democrats alike for what they saw in Washington.

And so the question was, would it be easier for us to say we want to restore dignity and honor to the White House and bring the country together, or would it be easier for Al Gore to? Gore could have handled the second half of that; I’m not certain how well he could have handled the first half of it. Yes, the atmosphere in Washington presented challenges. Poor Bob Dole’s first name in the 1996 Presidential campaign was Gingrich. If in the public’s mind Bush was another conventional Republican trashing Clinton, then his name could have been Gingrich.

Milkis: So in a way it was an opportunity for you because you had the sense of a conservatism that wasn’t reflexively antigovernment.

Rove: Right.

Milkis: So that played off of the Gingrich revolution.

Rove: Well, the first element was not reflexively antigovernment. That wasn’t the thing we were aiming to mitigate. We were aiming, first and foremost, to mitigate the sense of gratuitous partisanship. It’s the same note that [Barack] Obama struck in ’08. I don’t want to be the President of red states, blue states, but the United States. That was more important than any sense of conservatism.

Milkis: This is something that’s always kind of puzzled me, this thing about partisanship, because you are partisan. You believe in parties, and yet you have to find this line between constructive partisanship and destructive partisanship.
Rove: Right.

Milkis: I don’t know quite how to phrase this question, but is that a challenge?

Rove: Oh, yes, sure.

Milkis: To find that boundary?

Rove: Sure. It’s a whole bunch of challenges. It’s a challenge in a campaign because you get too mushy and your partisans don’t care, and if you’re not mushy enough, then the independents that swing elections won’t care, can’t be reached. When I went into the White House, there was the practical issue of I was the partisan guy.

Milkis: You were the lightning rod.

Rove: I was the lightning rod. Most people thought my days in the White House were spent worrying about electoral politics, and most of my days in the White House were spent worrying about the next staffing for the President’s speech, and the meeting on Medicaid expansion, and the meeting on EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] regulation, and the energy task force meeting, so the politics receded. My job was to keep the politics out of the President’s purview as much as possible, minimize it, knowing you can’t get it all the way out.

Milkis: And focus on policy?

Rove: Yes, which was really interesting and why it was so exciting to be there.

Riley: Was there ever a chance he would not run in 2000?

Rove: Yes. Bush is one of these very disciplined people who can say OK, I am open to this idea, but I haven’t made my decision yet. I’m convinced that through the 1998 election, until March of ’99, he is open to it, but undecided until early spring 1999.

Riley: Right.

Rove: It was a battle to let him allow us to file the committee in early March, because he was in the middle of a legislative session. We kept making the argument to him that if you wait until June, then we will have six months to prepare for the Iowa caucuses, and if you do it in March, we will have nine months. We will lose a third of our time if we wait, and because it takes a certain amount of time to get the machinery up and going, we will lose half our time to become fully operational if we wait until June or late June to do this.

Riley: And were there any external events or factors that might have played a role in this? Was there anything you were paying particular attention to?

Rove: This was all personal.

Riley: All personal.

Rove: It was all personal. I think there’s the story he tells about his mother talking about his
Methodist preacher in Dallas. I think that really was an important moment, but even then, it was not for a couple weeks more before he said OK, go.

**Riley:** Karl, are you a religious person?

**Rove:** Yes, I’m an Episcopalian, so we’re not allowed to be particularly religious.

**Riley:** What were the crucial decisions? We’ve got just about another 10 minutes before we’re done today. What were the main inflection points during the 2000 campaign?

**Rove:** The first one was that we got out of the gates in just the right way. We went to Iowa, the first event in Iowa, which showed some strong endorsements, widespread support, a positive and compelling message, and a lot of enthusiasm. And it was the same in New Hampshire. We got off to a good start. Then three weeks later we had the finance report. I was in the room in Los Angeles when the press literally gasped. Of course, Bush cannot keep a secret. It’s amazing that the man was Commander in Chief and maintained all those secrets for so long, because when it comes to campaigns—we literally told him, en route to the event, what the number was, and we said, “We’re not telling anybody the number until we make a big announcement on this on the 30th.” So he gets to the press conference in L.A. and somebody asks him and he was like, “Here’s the number,” and literally, there was a gasp.

That was an inflection point, and then the very stupid straw poll, which was somebody’s last chance to jump up and grab the banner of principal challenger. When [Steve] Forbes failed to do it, it effectively killed the campaigns of [Lamar] Alexander, [Elizabeth] Dole, and Newt Gingrich. Ironically enough, while we’re all wasting time and money and energy in Iowa, [John] McCain is doing the smart thing in August, which is the other inflection point. He is digging in, in New Hampshire, in a way that is not readily apparent, tapping into the psyche of New Hampshirites, who like to upset the apple cart. That was the month where he laid the predicate for the victory he had in New Hampshire.

There are several points during the fall during which Bush is laying out concrete policy, which is not widely seen by the public, but I think was seen by the press as validation or evidence that Bush was a very serious contender in the general election. We called it the primary of ideas, which we had to win. The primary of ideas was that Bush has a concrete plan for the future. We were trying to pitch that to Republicans, but we’re also trying to pitch it to the press so that they would say this guy is going to be a substantive guy. It was clear they were going to subject us to extraordinary scrutiny. Did the numbers add up? When they talked to Bush about a position paper, did he seem to know what the hell it was? Because even then the rap was they liked him a lot personally, but they thought he’s not a policy, substantive guy. Look, every Governor has the advantage of being an executive, but they also have the disadvantage of not having spent a lot of time on national issues, so our issue and advisory groups were enormously important.

**Riley:** This was mostly your doing?

**Rove:** The policy director is Josh Bolten, and the credit is his and his team’s. I’m an advocate in ’97 and ’98 of starting to lay the foundation for it, so that we have a robust effort. We can’t pick up the latest Heritage Foundation white paper, the latest talking points from AEI [American Enterprise Institute], and skate by. Bush’s natural attitude is—he has an MBA [master’s degree
in business administration], he’s a Yale history major. He wants all the information. He wants to
digest it, absorb it, move it around, question it, investigate it, think about it, and come to his own
conclusion. That’s hard to do in a campaign. Most campaigns are run with one foreign policy
guy, you know?

Milkis: Yes.

Rove: Our admonition to Condi [Condoleezza Rice] was broad-gauged and diverse.

Milkis: Was that the biggest challenge, foreign policy, since he was Governor and most of his—

Rove: Perhaps. I think on defense and foreign affairs, Bush had an instinct that there was a
question about his substantiveness. He was helped on defense because he hit on this idea of
transformation of military right from the get-go. We had this one meeting of the foreign policy
task force, Cheney and a whole bunch of guys. Dov Zakheim was giving a presentation on the
defense budget. This is the former comptroller of DoD [Department of Defense], who knows
every intimate detail of the budget, going through it in detail.

Bush listens for a while and then cuts him off and asks, “What is the purpose of our military in
the 21st century?” This provokes this unbelievable discussion. While there was clarity about
what the purpose of the mission of the military was in the second half of the 20th century, we
were at a hinge point where there were new challenges coming that caused people to have
different attitudes about the implications for the military. This is where Bush begins to be
acquainted with the theories of the guy who is the foremost advocate of transformation, Donald
Rumsfeld, who under Ford is the youngest Defense Secretary in the history of the United States,
and under 43, the oldest.

The meeting ends with agreement that the force structure we had in place is no longer applicable
to the 21st century and we’d better wake up about it. So Bush ends up giving a speech in South
Carolina, at the Citadel, that talks about the subject that makes most people’s eyes glaze over,
but becomes one of the most important contributions of the Bush administration and of Donald
Rumsfeld’s leadership, which is the transformation of the military. We go from these huge force
structures with lots of artillery, lots of heavy mechanized equipment designed to stop Soviet
tanks coming through the Fulda Gap. Instead, we have much smaller, more nimble, more fast-
moving, more mobile, and more lethal military structures that are capable of being deployed
anywhere across the world quickly. That afternoon was like going to graduate school at the
National War College. It was an amazing conversation, provoked by Bush saying OK, fine, I’ve
read the paper on the budget, but your budget is your plan reduced to numbers, and is this the
right plan?

Riley: Right.

Rove: You know, are we planning for the future? Not knowing 9/11 is coming, but knowing that
the world is a much different place.

Milkis: That’s really interesting, because so much emphasis was on we don’t want to do nation
building.
Rove: Right.

Milkis: This is a part of the campaign that really struck you. But you had reservations about Rumsfeld, right? Because you wanted this to be a new—Maybe you didn’t?

Rove: This was above, very much above, my pay grade, but when it came down to it, there weren’t a lot of choices. This was a really important post, and if you looked around at the available congressional options that we had, there were two or three names that were mentioned, but without Rumsfeld’s vision and experience. The only question about Rumsfeld was simply energy and when you called the guy and he was out beating some 35-year-old on the squash court, you wouldn’t worry about his energy. He did a masterful job for five years, and then the time came for a change.

Riley: We’ve got five minutes. Tell us about your relationship with Josh during the campaign. He is brought in as a policy director, but you’ve already said that you’re a policy guy too, so how are you two working together?

Rove: Like brothers. I love the guy in an entirely appropriate way. His contribution to the campaign is really extraordinary.

Riley: How did you identify him?

Rove: He was the Goldman Sachs risk assessment guy in London, and up for the chief of staff job at Goldman. Somebody who knew Bush knew Josh and said there’s a really smart guy. Bush met him and Bush knew he wanted deep policy. This idea of the primary of ideas was already ingrained in us well and we already had policy groups coming together. Josh was masterful. The guy is really a very effective manager, an incredible leader, really smart, really comfortable around lots of smart people, and with an impressive eye for talent.

Riley: Good political instincts as well?

Rove: Better than he gives himself credit for. But also he has said he was not going to try to try to be all things. He’s a good communicator, he’s a good pol, he’s got good strategic guidance, good strategic sense, and yet he said I’m a policy guy. This job is to make certain that Bush was completely informed, given a full range of options, has an honest hearing on all sides of the question so he can make up his own mind, and then whatever way he wants to go, Josh and his team would provide the structure and the substance that he wants for the position that he’s adopted.

Milkis: Did he share your enthusiasm that President Bush would be a different kind of Republican?

Rove: Oh, yes.

Milkis: He embraced that.

Rove: Look, this was in everybody’s DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid]. I can’t think of anyone in the campaign who didn’t believe we have to emphasize we’re a different kind of Republican,
though I assume there were some. We don’t want to go to war with the Gingrichites; we don’t want to go to war with anybody. We want to just say Bush is a different kind of Republican. Voters were going to find out that he’s talking about big important issues in a way that is unusual for a Republican, but also comforting, and not just for Republicans, but for others who hadn’t necessarily agreed with the GOP in the past.

Riley: Unbelievably, we’re done. We’re due back at 11:00 tomorrow.

Milkis: It was really fun. I hope you enjoyed it.

Rove: Yes, fun. All right, thank you, Russell, see you tomorrow.

June 12, 2013

Riley: We’re rolling. This is day two of the Karl Rove interview. Thanks for your time again. One of the things that I meant to mention yesterday, one of the pleasant surprises reading this book, was that you were a Hearst Foundation scholar in high school, from Utah.

Rove: Utah, yes.

Riley: What year?

Rove: Nineteen sixty-nine.


Rove: Oh, fantastic. Yes, we control the world. Susan Collins tells me that all the time.

Riley: Exactly. Mrs. [Millicent] Hearst was there to greet you, I suppose?

Rove: Yes, and Mr. [William Randolph] Hearst.

Riley: Oh, at that time—

Rove: He was still alive. In fact, he hosted the lunch with Spiro T. Agnew, who came to see us.

Riley: Was that your first big excursion in Washington?

Rove: The first trip I ever made to Washington.

Riley: I still remember going to the one tailor in Auburn, where I grew up, to get a corduroy suit made so that I could come up here on a cold January day.
Rove: There were several corduroy suits, as I recall, in my day, so don’t worry about it.

Riley: I was actually bragging about it, coming out of Alabama. It was really big stuff for us.

Rove: Exactly. If it had been in the summer, you would have been the guy in a seersucker suit.

Riley: Absolutely.

Milkis: We wore polyester in Philly.

Riley: Oh, is that right?

Milkis: Which is good practice for the APSA [American Political Science Association].

Riley: Let me ask you this, because we want to be mindful of your time and the fact that we’ve got a very solid written account. Let me start by asking if there was anything that occurred to you overnight, from yesterday, that we should have talked about?

Rove: No.

Riley: OK. The second piece is, were there things that you, for whatever reason, didn’t include in your account of the 2000 campaign that would be good for us to talk about as a supplement to your written account? Things that may have been too sensitive, either politically or personally?

Rove: I’d have to think about that. I assume that we may not get through everything, so there may be a third session.

Riley: We’re not going to get through everything.

Milkis: We were thinking five sessions. We’re all going to come out to your house in Austin.

Rove: Yes, there we go. I wouldn’t mind that, and neither would you.

Riley: We got you to the end of the primary season. You dealt a good bit with South Carolina in the book, and you also talk a little bit there about running aggressive campaigns. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the role of negative campaigning in modern Presidential campaigns.

Rove: Particularly South Carolina?

Riley: Well, that’s a place where it comes about, and you address some of this.

Rove: The interesting thing to me is the narrative out of South Carolina, that Bush won by a negative campaign against McCain.

Riley: That’s correct.

Rove: When in reality, the negative campaign, at least if you look at the television aspect, was started in New Hampshire with ads by McCain that attacked Bush on Social Security, as if McCain were sort of the typical, run-of-the-mill, garden-variety left Democrat. The ads said
Bush will eviscerate Social Security and leave seniors without their safety net and so forth.

**Riley:** Right.

**Rove:** We did not respond to it in New Hampshire.

**Riley:** Why not?

**Rove:** Because we were making mistakes left and right. One theory was that Bush had gotten where he was because he’d been running a positive campaign. The second was a mistaken belief that it was not hurting it, and third was just inertia. In a Presidential campaign, one of the things that most impressed me—Nothing can prepare you for it, even if people warn you about it—was the physical and mental exhaustion that you get after eight or nine or ten months of sustained campaigning. It’s hard. If you’ve been through a big campaign, like a Texas Senate or a gubernatorial campaign, you think you have a sense of what a Presidential campaign would be like. There’s nothing that compares to it. We’d been sort of geared up 10 to 11 months before, February of ’99, and by January and February of 2000, we’re just mentally beat, and so we’re making mistakes left and right, and this was one of them. You saw it retrospectively in the data, where we lost older—One of our best groups when we entered New Hampshire were older voters, and one of our worst groups when we exited New Hampshire were older voters.

So in South Carolina, he came up with this same set of ads and we decided that we would go back at him directly, because particularly in a primary, the counterpunch is sometimes more powerful than the punch. His first ad implied things that were not true and we came back at him over those misstatements, and he came back at us with his famous ad that implied that Bush was like Bill Clinton, that we were shading the truth like Bill Clinton. This was a huge opening, because whether you agreed or disagreed with Bush on the particular issue, Republicans didn’t think of George W. Bush as Bill Clinton.

[BREAK]

**Rove:** This was a moment of overreach for McCain. He’s so angry that he runs this ad where he compares Bush to Clinton, and that’s just completely over the top. When it comes to Presidential races, Republican primary voters—and I think this is true of Democrat primary voters—they become election judges and TV pundits. So they make their decisions in part based on are you doing a good job of defending yourself? If you’re not going to defend yourself, why should I defend you? Part of what happened to us in New Hampshire was that people saw this attack on Bush, heard no response from him, and said, Well, what’s going to happen when Al Gore takes him on in the general election?

The backstory on our response to McCain’s TV ad is very funny. We’ve got our TV guys landing in Charlotte and driving north—the wrong direction. When they call the office, we tell them to head south or they’ll miss the chance to get Bush on camera, responding. The driver turns out to be a Mississippi cameraman who has had a DWI [driving while intoxicated] offense
and has no drivers’ license—and they get pulled over. The cop turns out to be a Bush fan and lets
them go. They make the rendezvous with Bush at a roadside state park with no time to spare.
They set up, Bush nails the ad, and off they get ready to go, but it turns out there’s dirt on the
lens. They have to retape, and Bush is like, Mister, I have to be on time. So they reshoot it, then
he gets in the car, ready to go 90 miles an hour to his next event. Just a classic comedy of errors.

But anyway, it was a very strong response that blew McCain up. Then we got to the debate at
Columbia. Bush and McCain get into an exchange about Social Security, and McCain is
complaining about negative campaigning. And Bush says, “Well, you’re engaged in it. You’re
attacking me on Social Security, and here’s what you’re saying.” McCain says, “No, we aren’t,”
and Bush pulls out a McCain flier we’d found on the windshield in an upstate shopping center
earlier that day that Bush had put in his pocket. Bush pulls it out, waves it at McCain, and
McCain says, “That’s not from us,” and Bush says, “Well, it says right here ‘Paid for by McCain
for President.’” And McCain just explodes, but we won the point big time.

Riley: Right.

Rove: So when we have the adjunct professor at Bob Jones University pop up—This is in the
Neanderthal era—and he’s got 200 people on his email address list, to whom he circulates an
email alleging that John McCain sired a child outside of wedlock and she’s black. He’s actually
referring to McCain’s adopted Bangladeshi daughter, which is a wonderful story. But the email
sets off McCain and Mrs. [Cindy] McCain. They blame Bush. I’m convinced that’s the moment
that defeat was confirmed. I think we were on our way to victory with the way the exchange
played out. But when the McCain campaign responded angrily, alleging that Bush was behind
this, with no shred of evidence, it boomeranged. In fact, Jonathan Karl, who was then at CNN
[Cable News Network], actually tracked down the professor and confronted him, and he
admitted that this was his own deal. The McCain campaign turned what could have been a
positive for them into a huge negative. The best thing they could have done is share this
incredible story of love and compassion that lies behind it.

Cindy and John McCain believe so deeply in serving others that they took not one but two
orphan children from Bangladesh, raised one of them as their own daughter and gave the other
one to a young aide and his wife who were unable to start a family, and then secretly, behind the
scenes, paid the gigantic hospital bills to make that child well. Instead of saying that, the McCain
campaign was alleging, whether they understood it or not, that the people of South Carolina
would be swayed by a bigoted appeal. That might have worked in South Carolina in 1957, but
not there in 2000. The state had an Indian American Governor of South Carolina, for God’s sake,
and an African American Republican U.S. Senator.

The danger point for us was that the McCain people would wake up, get out of their cocoon, and
say, “How can we turn this to our advantage?” Not, “How does this make us feel?” It was a
powerful lesson to me.

Riley: And more generally about negative campaigning, it works or it doesn’t work?

Rove: It does if it’s true, fair, and relevant. When the Democrats took the material about Bush’s
drunk driving, his DWI at Kennebunkport, and fleshed it out in the last five days of the
campaign, it had an impact, because people said, Wait a minute, this is so much at odds with what I’ve come to think about you; what else don’t I know? So it was considered to be, by some significant number of people, fair and relevant, and it had an impact as a result.

Riley: Let me ask you also, during this interval—and Sid is by far the expert on this, more than I am—but what about the proliferation of these unaffiliated groups, and the role they have in the campaigns? Is this something that is a problem for a campaign, trying to corral this stuff?

Rove: Yes.

Riley: Are there ways of—You report here, in one instance, of somebody wanting to go negative and your getting them to call off the dogs.

Rove: Pat Robertson, which we found out by complete accident. We had a Pat Robertson loyalist who was also, fortunately, a Bush loyalist, who called up and said, in essence, that my associate is about ready to do something very stupid, and you need to know about it. I called up Pat and I said, “I understand you’re about ready to do this. Please don’t do that.” Now, what happened is that we then had to absorb the cost of the ineffectual activity that we talked him into doing.

Riley: I see, OK.

Rove: He was going to make an independent expenditure that would have been enormously unhelpful, and we said we understand you might be contemplating this, don’t do this. Instead, why don’t you do something inside the envelope that’s positive?

In 2000, we were on the receiving end of a 501(c)(4) fund, the NAACP National Voter Fund, which got one contribution, variously described as $10 million or $14 million. They said $10 million. They bought close to $14 million worth of media for one individual that was used to run an ad alleging that Bush was a racial bigot. There were a lot of 501(c)(4) Democratic groups operating back then, but virtually none on the Republican side. The League of Conservation Voters, Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, National Abortion Rights Action League, NAACP National Voter Fund, all of them were operating under the 501(c)(4) law, which says you have to spend a majority of your money on social welfare; you can spend a minority of your money on express electioneering.

Now, since 2010, we’ve seen an expansion of these so-called super PACs [political action committees], which is less a result of Citizens United and more just a realization that the Democrats were doing it and Republicans ought to try and match it. It was like we woke up after Americans United for Change, Americans Coming Together, and then all of these liberal groups using 501(c)(4)s. Finally, Republicans and conservatives said we’ve got to be playing in the same space. But they represent grave difficulties for our political system and for the candidates that they’re around.

Riley: OK, but it’s more on the opposition side, as you’re talking about it, than it is in trying to herd the independents who are working on your behalf, but are doing so in ways that aren’t coordinated.

Milkis: It’s hard to herd them because it’s illegal to coordinate that activity.
Rove: You can’t coordinate. What’s happening now is that organizations like the [Mitt] Romney campaign, in essence, blessed people to go forth and create Restore Our Future, but two things happened. One is that you have vast sums of money in these things, so every consultant says I want a piece of it. In the case of Restore Our Future, one out of every six dollars raised went into the pockets of the consultants. They paid 6 percent of the money that they raised to the fund-raising consultants, unbeknownst to the volunteers who were actually doing the fund-raising. The associates and friends of Romney who were calling on fellow rich people to ask for a $50,000 check, a $100,000 check, a $500,000 check were completely unaware.

As one said to me, “You’re telling me that the guy who pushed the elevator button for me got six cents out of every dollar I raised?”

Milkis: I don’t know how deep you want to go into this, but would you support deregulating the party, so to speak, and allow them to, like before the McCain-Feingold Act, raise money, soft money?

Rove: Yes.

Milkis: Because in a sense they’re more transparent. People know what they are, what they’re labeled.

Rove: I still think, though, that once the cat is out of the bag, you’ll still have 501(c)(4)s on the conservative side, because you look at—where did the League of Conservation Voters’ money come from, for 20 or 30 years, where they ran the “Dirty Dozen” ads? Every two years they’d pick out a dozen Members of Congress, who—Incidentally, 11 or 12 of the dozen were Republicans. How did that happen? And they used so-called dark money to do it, and nobody on the left complained about it. I don’t remember an ugly editorial from the New York Times in 2010 saying the NAACP National Voter Fund has a moral responsibility to step forward and tell us who that person was. I think, incidentally, it was Ted Turner. We were told by several people in Atlanta in a position to know that he told them that he was the source for the contribution, but we never had enough to go to the press and say anything. And, of course, the press was completely unsympathetic.

Milkis: So now you have kind of an organizational arms race, where liberals are way out in front on this kind of stuff.

Rove: Yes.

Milkis: And now conservatives think they have to form these groups to compete, and it’s very hard, as you say, to get cats back in the bag.

Rove: Yes, and this is apropos. One of the interesting things done at the Labor Department during the Bush years was done by the guy who ironically enough is now the head of American Crossroads, Steven Law, who was then, I think, the number-two guy at Labor. He got more transparency in the so-called LM-2s. These are the filings that every union has to do every year on its expenditures that were hid in a deep, dark vault inside the Labor Department. Even if you found them, it was virtually incomprehensible to figure out what they were spending their money on. Law authorized a new form that has transparency and made them available on the Web. Do
you know how much money the labor unions have spent collectively on politics in the last two
election cycles?

**Milkis:** I did see those figures, but I can’t remember.

**Rove:** Two-point five billion.

**Milkis:** Yes, that’s a lot of money.

**Rove:** That’s more than the two Presidential campaigns combined.

**Milkis:** Yes, it would be.

**Rove:** And yet, that kind of money has been flowing into politics. The reported number for direct
expenditures in 2008 was $400 million.

**Milkis:** Let me segue back to the election that relates to this. I’ve always felt, Karl, that one
thing that’s lost in all this talk about super PACs and TV ads is the ground game.

**Rove:** Right.

**Milkis:** One of the things I’ve always found interesting about you is that you’re kind of a pioneer
in developing a high-tech ground game, combining microtargeting with voluntarism. How much
of that did you test-drive in the primaries? For example, did you have a good ground game in
South Carolina? People aren’t paying attention to all this?

**Rove:** We won the nomination in part because we had organization in depth, and McCain did
not. We were focused on the general election right from the beginning, and so we said,
particularly in these general election battleground states that figured in the primary season—like
New Hampshire and Florida—we needed to make certain that we had a strong organization. We
devoted a lot of resources to it. So, for example, even though Ohio was a late primary, we put
extra resources there during the primary.

**Milkis:** Anticipating the jumps.

**Rove:** Yes.

**Milkis:** So that began in 2000? It wasn’t just 2002, when you guys began to really put together
this ground game?

**Rove:** No. What we did in 2001–03 to prepare and test for 2004 was born out of the knowledge
that what we had done in 2000—while extensive—was still not sufficient. We came so close in a
number of places we felt we could compete, thus—Maine’s second congressional district, Iowa,
Oregon, Wisconsin, and New Mexico—New Mexico was especially intense. We actually won
but lost the state because of a minor computer error in the software package that was used to
count votes in rural counties, mostly in Little Texas, the southeastern corner of the state. Still,
our 2000 ground campaign experience caused us to say, We’d better step this up. Most obviously
the closeness of Florida caused us to say everything that we’ve done, as important as it was, was
insufficient; what more can we do?

I thought one of the great ironies of the 2000 primaries was when the McCain campaign was dismissive of our organization and said, “We’ll give them Oklahoma and Mississippi.” We secured the nomination—went over the top in delegates—the day of the Mississippi primary. The reason was because, in part, we had a deep organization. Every state had a chairman, cochairman, special voter groups, and every county organized in the same manner, all the way down.

Milkis: Did you set up these organizations as parallel with the existing state and local organizations, or did you work hand-in-glove with the existing structures?

Rove: In the general elections, we worked hand-in-glove with the regular GOP organization, but not in the primaries.

Milkis: In the primaries you had to put together your own organization.

Rove: Yes, you had to put together your own, because state parties, with very few exceptions, do not endorse in Presidential primaries and take no role. But in the general election, we worked hand-in-glove with the victory committee efforts, augmented their manpower with our Bush volunteers. In fact, one of the key decisions in the 2000 campaign was to keep Jim Nicholson as chairman of the RNC and Tom Cole, now a Congressman, as the executive director. We needed to make certain that the national committee was completely wired in, on the financial side and on the political side. On the financial side, we sent over our finance team and our staff, but on the political side, this required a lot of diplomacy and skill, because the national committee necessarily has a responsibility to everybody else who’s got an “R” behind their name on the ballot. We couldn’t disrupt everything that they were doing, but we had to make certain that as much as reasonably possible was being done to make certain to ensure the success of the Presidential ticket.

Our political director in the campaign had been Maria Cino, who had been the executive director of the NRCC [National Republican Congressional Committee] in 1994, under Bill Paxon, when we took the House. She’s about this tall and about that wide, and she was really, really gifted. No one could have done a better job at this very difficult task. We were looking around trying to figure out who we could have to take on this very challenging responsibility at the national committee, and concluded that only one person could do it, and that was Maria.

Now, in a way, she brought this on herself, because she kept complaining the entire primary about how she had just bought and moved into a new townhouse in Alexandria before picking up and moving to Texas, so she had this house sitting in Washington, empty. We said, Look, it will be easier for us to get somebody to fill your shoes as the political director of the campaign than to find somebody else to sit in the cockpit of the national committee who knows all these personalities, knows how to manage them, and can bend the arc of the national committee toward us without making it fail to meet its responsibilities to others. Bush kept saying, “I don’t want a lonely victory,” particularly in ’04, but even in ’00 he said, “I’m running as part of a team and I’ll be more successful if I get there with more people who back my views.”

So we sent Maria up there to do this and she did a magnificent job. It helped us from the top to
the bottom to knit these victory committee efforts of state parties and the national committee with the Bush organizations in each state. We generated bodies and enthusiasm and put resources in, and they provided structure and resources. They’d had done a lot of foundational groundwork, even while we were working on the primary, and then Maria was able to integrate seamlessly. I think Maria has never forgiven me for having sent her back off. She saw this as like sort of being sent to Siberia, not understanding that Siberia was essential to our success. She did a magnificent job and it was a real strength in the general election. Still, our experience of coming so close in so many states, either winning or losing, led us to say we’d better step this up in 2004.

**Milkis:** The unions did a pretty good job mobilizing voters in 2000.

**Rove:** They did. And we also made a critical error at the end, which was a New Hampshire error. It’s hard—we were focused on getting out the vote the last week, and so it was mechanical and the message was mechanical—I need your help, I need your support—and we had lost out on the lesson of 1994, which was message really mattered in compelling people to the polls. We didn’t make that mistake in 2004, but we did make it in 2000.

**Milkis:** Interesting.

**Perry:** Back to that, Karl, you said that part of it was fatigue. Do you think that really was the reason for losing out on the big idea and the content portion of the primary season?

**Rove:** It was in New Hampshire; it didn’t happen after that in the primaries.

**Perry:** And how did you overcome then, because you still had a long season to go?

**Milkis:** A long way to go.

**Perry:** And a general election.

**Rove:** Well, just will. But the critical moment is Bush’s reaction to the New Hampshire loss. We were sitting in a little room about this size, with the candidate and his wife, knowing that in a couple of hours the final results are going to show him losing by 20 points. This is generally the moment a candidate loses control and begins to say, “How did you let this happen?” The knives start being sharpened and people go into the fetal position. But Bush, in this moment, was unbelievable.

**Perry:** Tell us what that was like.

**Rove:** Bush sat in this dinky little hotel room in suburban Manchester and said, “We’re going to lose. It’s my fault, and I don’t want anybody to think anything else.”

**Perry:** No anger on his part?

**Rove:** No anger. “We came to this together; we’re going to win together. We’re going to pick ourselves up and we’re going to smile tonight and we’re going to go on to South Carolina and we’re going to figure out what we need to do differently, but this loss is on my shoulders, not
yours. I have confidence in you. We’re going to win this contest.” You can imagine how fragile a campaign can be in a moment like this.

Riley: Sure.

Rove: Everybody from Pinky [Joe M.] Allbaugh, the six foot three, 280-pound, flattop Oklahoman—

Milks: That you could land an airplane on.

Rove: Exactly. Karen, Donnie L. Evans, Mark McKinnon, we were all sitting there, and this is the moment where most campaigns begin to fracture and fall apart. Instead, this was the moment where everybody said, Damn it, he’s right. We’ve got to do better and each of us will do our part and we’re going to come out of this and win. At the end of the next 19 days, we did, and while everybody got buoyed with the energy and enthusiasm of the moment, we knew that we still had a long way to go. We had a series of bitter battles in Virginia and Michigan, where we lost, but that was the moment where the nomination was assured.

Perry: You made a reference just then to being in a small room after a defeat, or defeat is coming, with the candidate and the spouse. In your memoir, you talk about how Mrs. Bush was not involved in the earliest campaigns and didn’t even make one speech, I think you say, in that first half.

Rove: Right, yes, 1994, she never makes a speech.

Perry: Never makes a speech. Do you see her developing over time, in Texas, the second campaign, and now into the primaries, and on into the general election?

Rove: The simple explanation is that she grows and develops, but that may just be that we see her more. It is clear that this relationship, what she thinks and what her insights are, are really critical to him, always have been. That’s one of the things that makes this relationship so powerful and sustains both of them, is that they are so close and they depend on each other. I reject the idea that she grew. She grew in the public role, but my gut feeling is that she’s always had really sound judgment and shared her sound judgments in private. She certainly did so when the news of our impending New Hampshire loss broke.

Perry: Can you give examples of her participating in those discussions in those small-group settings and in those hotels?

Rove: Mostly she would just watch and observe. Rarely did she say something publicly, and I think that’s in part because she understood how powerful her comment would be, and it was better delivered in private to him. In fact, her question to him that morning in New Hampshire—“Are you going to defend yourself?”—was first delivered privately and then only shared by him with his inner circle. He then later says, “Do you know what Laura said to me? She said this and I think she’s right.” She has keen judgment and she’s really good at sizing up people’s strengths and weaknesses. She’s got the intuitiveness in reading people that comes from being well-read and understanding people.
Milkis: That’s interesting.

Riley: You talked about the NAACP a little while ago, and as narrow as the margins were going to be in this 2000 election, was there a concerted effort to try to maximize the black vote? Can you talk a little bit about your accomplishments or frustrations, whichever?

Rove: I think we went to the Urban League and made a major education speech. I ran into a guy at the airport the other day who said, “You won’t remember me, but,” he said, I’m So-and-So and I was at Bush’s Urban League speech. He said, “I’ve always admired that he came to our group because it was clearly not a friendly group. I was just so taken with his passion for the topic.”

Look, even back then, we were saying make certain that you have, in the leadership of your campaign, the diversity of your community, and that they’re not always just the Latinos for Bush or African Americans for Bush, but fully integrated into the structure itself. The African American vote in 2000 was very troubling to us because we ended up with 8 percent. After the election, an analyst named Rich Nadler from Kansas City, who has since died at a young age, did this very interesting study in which he looked at Kansas City and said assume everybody, black and white, saw the same number of TV ads because you turn on the TV, and TV watching is more homogenous. There are certain programs that get more white viewers, and others that get more black viewers. But generally, viewing habits of the major networks are relatively demographically similar to the population at large. But radio is not.

Riley: Right.

Rove: So Nadler looked at the Kansas City radio that had predominantly African American listeners, urban radio, and he added up the number of radio ads that were pro-Gore, pro-Democrat, anti-Bush, anti-Republican, versus pro-Bush, pro-Republican, anti-Gore, anti-Democrat, over the course of the 2000 campaign, and it was 16,000:6.

Riley: Wow.

Rove: And I don’t mean six thousand, I mean six. There were 16,000 individual radio ads that were Democratic versus six Republican ads. And so his point was, how can you win the argument if you’re not making the argument? This was an important lesson for us for 2004. So, for example, in Ohio we bought vast amounts of radio advertising on religious stations that had heavy African American listenership. First of all, the data showed us that urban, hip-hop, and so forth, the listenership audience, while it was substantially black, was not open to Bush, whereas the religious stations that had large African American listenership were.

We mainstreamed delivering on African American radio. We did a lot of this in Ohio, under the radar, and the media never figured it out. Bush went from 8 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2004 in Ohio. We did the same with Spanish-language radio advertising on heavy Latino stations in Florida. Interestingly, in Miami, our Latino demographic was both Spanish- and English-language.

Milkis: Now, in terms of issues, it’s clear why the Hispanic vote was relatively good, because you guys were really good on, from their perspective, immigration reform.
Rove: I’m not certain that was the principal reason for Bush’s strength. Immigration wasn’t the central issue in either 2000 or 2004. I think what happened was that Bush had a message that resonated with the conservative instinct and sentiment in the Latino community. It was important that he was approachable. When he would go into a room of Latino activists, or go into a Latino business establishment in a heavy Latino community, he was at home. When he would come into a Latino meeting in Iowa, there would be Israel Hernandez, his deputy, standing there talking Spanish. And so they looked at him and said he was open and approachable.

We did have one issue that involved—I can’t remember what it was specifically, but Bush talked about family values don’t end at the Rio Grande in Iowa, which is where the immigration issue first arose. There was an incident involving one of the staffers being profiled, which I think helped us. The poor kid got pulled over because he was a Latino and, “Are you a U.S. citizen?” Bush was asked about it. I think it was less specifically the issue, immigration, and more the openness of him and his message about educating every child and compassionate conservatism giving him an entry point into the Hispanic community.

Riley: Did you feel good about the response in the Latino community in 2000? You said you were disappointed with the black vote.

Rove: Yes, but look, we had gone from Texas, where it was roughly 40 percent in ’94 to 35 percent in 2000, but we did say we can do better and we ought to do better.


Rove: Yes, it went to 44 percent.

Riley: But in 2000, you were disappointed in how you did.

Rove: It was like OK, we’ve done better than anybody since Reagan in ’84, but felt we can do even better.

Riley: All right. I want to ask you, and thanks for indulging our questions about this because I know we’re not making a lot of progress on the timeline, but this is very valuable stuff.

Milkis: The broader issues, in a way. We have the details of it.

Riley: You indicated in your book that you staffed somebody to go do a study of the interval between when you secure the nomination and the general elections because you felt like, from your own vantage point, that had been a wasted interval in a lot of instances.

Rove: Right.

Riley: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what moved you to contemplate this in the first instance.

Rove: First, I’m sort of maniacally obsessive about trying to stay ahead. As I thought about the primary, one thing that struck me looking at past elections was that too many of these campaigns are too narrowly focused on the primary and not enough on the general election. So what are the
things that we need to pay attention to that will be at least neutral in the primary and perhaps helpful in the primary, that would be enormously helpful in the general election? Some of them were minor things, like make certain that you have extra resources and organization for the primary in general election battleground states. You know, minimize the number of specialty groups that you go after and focus on the important ones. Remember, with Nixon in ’72, they had something like 40, including Croatian Americans for Nixon.

Milkis: Yes.

Rove: My thought was, looking at it, you needed to do a better job in figuring out who it was you were going after, because if you set it in motion at the beginning, it would have a longer period of time to generate an impact. Another thing that was clear from past campaigns, having secured the nomination, campaigns had a tendency to flounder. They came through the primary and it took them three weeks, four weeks, five weeks, six weeks, to get their sea legs. In fact, just by coincidence, this was crystallized for me when I was under the guidance of Professor Lewis Gould, reading about the 1896 McKinley campaign.

Milkis: He’s the one who introduced you to McKinley.

Rove: After the Republican Convention—[Mark] Hanna is going to go take a cruise to Maine, get on his yacht and go to Maine and go up into Canada, since the election is all over. The day that [William Jennings] Bryan is nominated, Hanna says, “It’s a disaster.” They also say, “We’re going to be fighting this on the tariff, and the currency issue will quickly fade.” And then it turns out, by God, they’ve got a real fight on their hands over the money issues and they were unprepared for it. They have not thought ahead.

Under pressure, the McKinley men have a whole series of conferences in mid to late July, in which they make two big critical decisions, and each decision sends the contest in a different direction than the arc of the campaign up to that point. Hanna says you need to go stump the country, just like Bryan is doing. McKinley has this great comment, in which he says, “I might just as well put up a trapeze on my front lawn and compete with some professional athlete as go out speaking against Bryan.” So the famous “Front Porch” strategy is born. Then the campaign belatedly recognizes it must put the currency issue first and that tariffs will play a lesser role This was critical. The McKinley men were about ready to screw it all up by ignoring the silver issue, which was splintering the GOP and about to send Bryan to the White House.

So, as we approached 2000, we had a small unit that was sitting there thinking about what do we do the day after we secure the nomination? Josh Bolten’s policy team played a big—Because the natural temptation is to get to a certain point in the primary where you are not going to be introducing anything new, just recycling some old stuff. So Josh began thinking about the phasing of what we would do in the first two weeks, 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, after we secured the nomination. And we literally had a 90-day plan that said OK, whatever day this happens—and it ended up being March 13—here’s what we’re going to do over the next period of time.

It’s notional, and you then have to have everybody buy into it, and before you get to March 13th, but you have to be prepared. We had a pretty good notional plan in place by the time the 13th of March rolled around.
Riley: Were you happy with your convention?

Rove: Yes, mostly. A different kind of Republican emerged out of it and the energy of the party was good, and it was in a critical city and a critical state. Yes, generally satisfied with it.

Riley: Does the convention serve a useful purpose still?

Rove: Well, yes. Not the purpose of deciding the nominee, that is all handled mechanically now, and the platform, because of the way it’s framed by people who attend each party’s convention who are never seen in any other constructive activity for three and a half years, can present problems for you.

Milkis: Were there any platform fights that you remember?

Rove: No, we handled the contentious issues early in the process, in large part because we anticipated and worked through the RNC to damp the problems down. We did have, however, a rules fight that we short-circuited because, basically, the rules committee was about ready to take steps that would be seen as punitive by both Iowa and New Hampshire, and we didn’t want to upset either one of those battleground states.

Milkis: I got there early.

Rove: Right.

Milkis: The primary and the schedule.

Rove: So we just killed it. There were the normal, customary battles over the life plank and some other things, but they were adroitly handled.

Riley: Who handled the convention for you?

Rove: We sent Andy Card to take over control of the operation. He had not been involved in the primary, but was a big, enthusiastic supporter. That’s where we picked up Eddie Gillespie to handle convention communication and then brought him to Austin. We promised him that he would have a garage apartment to live in. He arrived thinking that it would be the typical garage apartment and not knowing that it looked like something out of Architectural Digest. He jokingly became the Kato Kaelin of the campaign. We put Mark McKinnon in charge of messaging for the convention, and he and Eddie worked closely.

Again, the convention preparations are largely underway before you secure the majority of delegates, but you have to resculpt the program for the candidate. That means whatever plan the RNC has in place, it has to be rejiggered and redone, and then you want somebody with a keen eye, like McKinnon, to be looking at it from the point of the prospective nominee’s needs. You need Eddie and Mark to say here’s the messaging that’s going to be coming out of this, here’s the picture that we want to have. Then you need to have somebody like Andy there to minimize complaints and maximize compliments.

Riley: And the candidate is happy with the convention?
Rove: Yes. The candidate was very nervous about the speech, because no matter how accomplished you are at this point, unless you have routinely gone and spoken to 22,000 people in an auditorium, it’s a daunting task. The purpose of conventions today is that they’re watched by partisans and by uncommitted voters who are interested: their reactions inform the balance of the campaign as to the quality of a candidate.

Riley: Right.

Rove: You also introduce information that people use as themes and narratives for the next 90 days, or 120 days back then, when we were meeting in July. We’re like Olympic judges. We all get to flash up our rating cards.

Riley: Is Bush nervous in front of a big audience?

Rove: Yes.

Riley: Always?

Rove: No, but remember, he knew more about this than most candidates for the Presidency, having witnessed his father three times on the national stage, twice running for President and once serving as a Vice President. So he had a sense of what this was. Bush also came from a big state. Running in Texas is different from running in South Dakota. But nonetheless, it’s still daunting to speak to 22,000 spectators and be watched by millions. If you look at his convention speech closely, you can see that at the key moments when people are just going completely nuts, he’s a little bit unnerved.

Riley: Let me ask you again, because you have a good narrative here. Let me ask you to do the flipside of the way you treat it in the book. Critique Al Gore’s campaign in 2000. What did he do well and where did he screw up?

Rove: Well, which campaign? That was the problem; there were so many different Al Gores. He could never settle on who it was that he was, and hence, how he could portray himself to the American people. There were so many different Al Gores—fighting Al Gore and reform Al Gore and little guy Al Gore and loyal Clintonite Al Gore. It just was constantly changing. If you had to pick one thing that more than anything else matters in Presidential campaigning, it’s authenticity. It’s not the only thing, but it’s probably the most important. Are you who you say you are?

Riley: Yes.

Rove: Because that informs people’s thinking about—When you say something, are you credible? When you display an emotion, is it real? When you do something, did you do it because that’s who you are or because you thought I wanted you to do that?

Milkis: Was part of the problem that he just didn’t know how to handle his relationship with Clinton? Did that contribute to the metamorphoses?

Rove: Yes.
Milkis: It was a kind of delicate situation, right? Clinton had had a good record but then there were the moral issues, which you guys were exploiting. “Exploit” is not quite the right word.

Rove: We were exploiting them, yes. When Bush said, “I’m going to restore dignity and honor to the White House,” we were drawing attention subtly to Clinton’s personal behavior without attacking it. We were saying what Bush would do and it had credibility because people had made a judgment about his parents that flowed over to him.

It struck me that Al Gore could have done that as well. Al Gore could have said something like, as your President I will act this way, and implicitly contrast himself from Clinton. I will never understand, on a tactical level, why he didn’t say to Clinton, I want you to go to every small town in Arkansas; and if you get tired of doing that, go to Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

Milkis: I think what was lost in that campaign, with all the attention going to Florida, was that Al Gore lost Tennessee. He lost his own state.

Rove: Yes, and the last Presidential candidate who had that happen to him was a fellow Tennessean, James K. Polk, who lost Tennessee.

Riley: But you’re picking up early on. According to the book, you detected that’s a sensitive spot that you can exploit.

Rove: Yes. Governor Don Sundquist and Chip [John Bruce] Saltsman, who was his chief political guy, were, very early on, very emphatic that Al Gore was viewed as having been born in Tennessee, but not being from and of Tennessee. That was a critical distinction that indicated the state was open to us. Arkansas Lieutenant Governor Win [Winthrop Paul] Rockefeller, who was a wonderful, sweet human being, had the same feeling about Arkansas. While the state was proud of Bill Clinton and proud of the fact that a President came from it, they had no similar loyalty to Al Gore and no sense of obligation to Clinton to take his Vice President and reward him with the state’s votes. The state was more conservative then than it had been when Clinton began his journey. Then Bush’s pledge to restore dignity and honor to the White House mattered to a lot of the people, particularly in the northwestern part of the state.

Riley: What about your own Electoral College investment, your own strategy? Could you critique yet? Where were you deficient, in retrospect?

Rove: As things began to erode, we should have seen Florida as the place where they could erode faster and quicker than anywhere else. We had a blind dumb faith that no matter what happened, Jeb Bush would pull it off. Even Jeb was very nervous about the election the last week to 10 days. We should have put more effort into New Mexico, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

Riley: So he was reporting to you that he was detecting—?

Rove: Jeb was nervous, and we did everything we were told by his people they wanted to have done, but even then, I don’t think they thought it would dwindle down to 1,300 votes. We spent a little bit more time in Ohio, at the expense of Florida, and then, of course, the final day’s run was the right thing to do, with maybe the exception of Iowa. We came awfully close in Iowa and
Wisconsin and New Mexico, but we spent the final day in the central part of the country. We started in Florida and then ended with a final event in Arkansas, but we should have spent a little more time in Florida.

Maine. I’m convinced we would have taken at least the second district if the DWI story had not broken in Maine. If the DWI story hadn’t broken at all, we probably would have taken Maine. But while we had a lot of resources, they were still limited, and I think we played in the right additional places. If we had more resources, my suspicion is Florida would have gotten much more, and New Mexico, Iowa, and New Hampshire might have gotten more resources, because they were all smaller, cheaper states. And if we’d gotten even more resources than that, then Pennsylvania, Michigan and, Minnesota, and Wisconsin would have gotten more resources.

Riley: You mentioned the DWI. When did you first find out about that?

Rove: Well, I’d known about it for a long time, so I don’t remember exactly when.

Riley: Back to the Texas race?

Rove: Oh, yes.

Riley: Is it the kind of thing that you would have talked about as a potential vulnerability, or had you known just as a friend?

Rove: I had known as a friend. When he was Governor, we had this weird episode where, ironically, he and I were called for the same Travis County jury pool.

Riley: I didn’t know you were in that pool.

Rove: I was. The jury pool meets in a gigantic auditorium, so it’s not a small, select group. I’m up in the bleachers of this gigantic auditorium, waiting for my group to be called, and there’s Al Gonzales, the Governor’s counsel, down there on the auditorium floor, talking with somebody about something, and it’s to basically try to get Bush out of the pool because he’ll be asked if he’s ever been convicted of anything. I remember sitting up there thinking, God, I hope he’s successful.

Riley: Were there serious conversations in 2000, about getting this out on your terms?

Rove: It was the biggest single mistake of the general election. If—in the interregnum, after Bush had secured the nomination and well before the general election—we had laid this out on our own terms, particularly in a moment of success, like in the aftermath of the L.A. announcement of the gigantic fund-raising, we could have had plenty of time for people to absorb it, digest it, and to move on. Instead, it was this last-minute surprise.

Riley: Exactly.

Rove: The biggest single mistake of the campaign.

Riley: And can I ask, were there other things that you were worried about similarly, that did not
come out?

Rove: No.

Riley: So this was the one personal thing. Who came up with the line, “When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible”?

Rove: Him.

Riley: Him?

Rove: Yes. As he’s also the author—He stole the idea—of “compassionate conservatism.” When we saw Clinton after the election, he said [imitating Clinton], “When I heard you say that phrase, ‘compassionate conservatism,’ George, I knew we were in deep trouble. That’s brilliant, it was just brilliant.”

Riley: You do a spot-on Clinton, I must say.

Rove: Exactly.

Riley: Guys, what else have you got?

Milkis: Well, since you mentioned the compassionate conservatism, I think one of the interesting balance acts you perform is that you connect Bush, make sure that the base is secure in support of President Bush, because with Bush 41, there was a lot of erosion of the base. And yet you also want to reach out to groups where the Republicans have been rather weak, and Russell asked you about that. That’s an interesting balancing act. Did you get some pushback on the “compassionate,” on the adjective? Did some people say we don’t want to be compassionate conservatives?

Riley: Of course we got some pushback from people saying we don’t need to have an adjective. But you’ve touched on something, and that is really important. If you view this as a balancing act, then it’s problematic, because you assume then that we’ve got a group here and we’ve got a group here, and we’ve got to balance the interests of the two, as opposed to saying we can lead all those people to be part of this.

Milkis: That’s what I wanted to know.

Rove: Consider someone who says, We’ve got the Tea Party and we’ve got the regular Republicans, so I’ve got to balance them; as opposed to, I’ve got a vision that incorporates all kinds of people. The reason compassionate conservatism worked was you had a lot of people saying our values are universal, how come we can’t get blacks and Latinos to vote for us? Our values have meaning for all people in all places at all times; why can’t we get some voters who ought to be our natural allies to be for us? Along comes Bush, saying I have an inclusive message that will draw people together. So you get the northeastern moderate Republican who says we’ve got to care about poor people, and you get the hard-ass conservative who says by God, I started out poor and I’ve made something with my life and it’s because these values are universal in nature. Suddenly you had a guy leading them, saying let’s go in a different direction.
If you look back, candidates who have been successful in bringing about change within political parties have been people who can draw people together.

**Milkis:** I have this coalition of interests, but have a unifying vision.

**Rove:** Right, a unifying vision that takes us in a different place. I’m William Jennings Bryan and they shall not crucify working-class Americans on a cross of gold. And there’s Ronald Reagan, Jack Kennedy, and FDR. Rarely are those visions simply rhetorical. Most of them are substantive changes as well, but they draw people together, at least initially, oftentimes from disparate coalitions and move them forward in a new direction by giving them a series of steel bands that draw them together and keep them together, until the bands weaken and somebody else comes along. What’s also interesting is that some candidates lose that initial unifying vision and fall into us-versus-them politics that ends their ability to reach out and drives their initial coalition apart, like Bryan.

**Milkis:** Which one of the programmatic initiatives followed from this vision? You know, there are faith-based initiatives, there’s No Child Left Behind. Which do you think was the most controversial? Which threatened this kind of—?

**Rove:** Education. It was the one for which he had the greatest passion and authenticity. The small-government conservatives said I don’t want the federal government, but that was assuaged by him saying, if we’re going to give them money, we ought to have something in return. And we’re going to blow the whistle on failure in a system in which the teachers’ unions dominate. But again, part of this was not just the substance of the argument but its presentation. When Bush said, “Every child deserves a chance and every child can learn,” this tended to cause strongly conservative people to say that’s right, and liberal people to say he’s right, too.

**Milkis:** What was that line, “the soft tyranny of low expectations”? 

**Rove:** The soft bigotry.

**Milkis:** Soft bigotry.

**Rove:** Of low expectations.

**Milkis:** Did he come up with that line?

**Rove:** Mike Gerson came up with it—a beautiful formulation. There’s the classic moment at the Philadelphia convention. We’re in a van riding back to the headquarters with Josh Bolten, Margaret Spellings, and a couple of others. I said to Josh, “Josh, have you got time tomorrow? One of our surrogates wants a personal briefing.” He said, “Yes, what time?” I said well, so-and-so, and at the Sheraton. He says, “Who is it?” And I said, “It’s Bo Derek.” I tell Josh, “She specifically asked for you. She’s taken with you, and she’d like to meet you. Would you have some time to spend briefing her?” Josh immediately turned sort of red and Margaret, who is the master of the short bawdy joke, begins needleling him. Her final line is, “Just remember about the low bigotry of soft expectations.” [laughter]

**Milkis:** What a great story.
**Rove:** It’s a classic. We were howling in this van, with our uncomprehending driver wondering what the hell we were all talking about: Bo Derek and the low bigotry of soft expectations.

**Riley:** I don’t think that did make it into the book, but maybe I missed it.

**Milkis:** Can we talk a little bit about the forming of the West Wing?

**Perry:** My question goes back to preparing then Governor Bush to give this very important speech at the convention, and now also thinking ahead to the debates. You talk, especially at the Harvard Symposium in the early 2000s, about the problems with debates just in general and the scheduling of them and all that, so we don’t need to go into that.

**Milkis:** The commission sucks, I think you said.

**Perry:** Yes. But my question is about you as a longtime friend of this candidate. How did you help him, aside from the substantive aspects of preparing? How could you help him get over those butterflies to prepare for a big speech, to prepare for debates? What did you tell him to boost him and say, you’re so good in the small retail politics? Did you remind him of that? Did you say do this, this, and this, that you do in retail politics, on the larger stage? Did you talk about it?

**Rove:** I’m not certain I was all that helpful in it. I think the main contribution I had was joining him in mocking advice. We get these people who say I just need two minutes with him, and I’ve got important advice to give him: he really needs to just be himself. So we used to always say it’s really important that you pay attention to this, Governor; it’s really important to remember, be yourself.

**Milkis:** Don’t be Al Gore.

**Rove:** And it was also to listen to him, because look, before the Washington University debate in St. Louis, where he said, “I’m going to go fishing with Don Evans,” that put him in the right mindset for it. In everything Bush does, he’s a competitor. Things where he should not necessarily compete, he’s a competitor. And good competitive personalities tend to be self-analytic. They constantly review themselves and come up with what will help make them a topflight competitor. So Bush would do a lot of preparation, but what you needed to do at the end was listen closely to him, because he would have an idea about the end as to how he needed to prepare himself for that moment.

**Perry:** Did you, in your mind, have a sense of why he didn’t seem to come across as effectively on camera?

**Rove:** I’ve never figured it out. In retail politics, he’s great. In the debates, he performed enormously well in moments of great stress. He was powerful in the September 14th National Cathedral speech and the State of the Union speeches. The convention speeches are really good, particularly the 2004 one, and the 2000 is surprisingly good, given the fact that it’s his first one. Yet, the normal and ordinary appearance on television—

**Milkis:** Press conferences and stuff like that.
Rove: Press conferences, he was better because it was often a give-and-take, a conversation. But reading the prepared text for the 90 percent of speeches that you normally give, not so good sometimes. But if you go back to the night of the announcement at the beginning of the action in Iraq, it’s a powerful moment. We should have done more one-on-one, long-form interviews where he can establish a rapport with somebody. But the kind of thing that most Presidents do—walking out in the Rose Garden and giving a statement, the set piece speech on reciprocity and trade agreements in front of a crowd of 400 people, those kind of things—He was good, sometimes great, but not as good as more spontaneous moments.

Perry: So his competitor side is where you said that often, in some ways perhaps, he would be his own worst critic and say, I want to do better; I need to do this; I see what I’m doing wrong. Could he not figure it out either?

Rove: If he could have, he would have. Look, these debates—He was good at absorbing lots of advice and gleaning what was important and what was not important. And it was the same in going through speeches. On these big speeches, the State of the Unions and so forth, we’d go through them, sometimes either in the Oval Office or in the family theater, and he was really good at sensing what interrupted the flow, where there was a weakness, where there was something that needed to be shored up, where things needed to be moved around. So that’s why he probably did well on the big set piece speeches, but on sort of the normal, run-of-the-mill stuff, he just didn’t come across as well as he did in other settings.

Milkis: Maybe he just didn’t like it as much.

Rove: That may be it.

Milkis: I mean, I like teaching seminars more than I like teaching big lecture classes, so maybe it was just a matter of what he felt comfortable with. He always seemed a little uncomfortable in those other settings. Did he acknowledge that, and did it bother him?

Rove: Yes, it did bother him.

Riley: I was going to ask again—You talk about Florida and the transition period. I don’t think we need to go into any of that unless you’ve got some specific probes, but I wanted to ask about the decision to take this election and treat it as a mandate election to govern. There was demonstrably not a decision taken to trim your sails and to try to accommodate the opposition, if you will.

Rove: No, I disagree with that.

Riley: All right.

Rove: We didn’t trim our sails in the sense that we didn’t say, OK, well, this election said to us that of our five major initiatives, three of them are not acceptable and we have to discard them. We took it as we won the election; we have an obligation to try to do in office what he said he would do on the campaign trail. But right from the beginning, Bush made it clear that the process of governing necessarily required interaction with the opposition and compromise and consensus.
Milkis: And from what I’ve read, you agreed with that.

Rove: I did. On a scale of how much are you willing to compromise, from here to here, I’m clearly over here in the compromise less. But you want diversity of opinion. You want everybody to be saying our object is to try and find ways to move these initiatives forward, which necessarily involves compromise and consensus. But some people will say let’s have more and some people will say let’s have less, so that the President and the process have a chance to find the right point to move the dial.

For example, on the 2001 tax cut, some of the compromises were explicit and others were implicitly laid out in varying degrees of clarity. We went from a trillion-seven to a trillion-three tax cut. Democrats were very explicit that they did not want the top rate to be 33 percent, a psychological number they didn’t want to hit. We had to make it a 35. They were also reasonably transparent that any money freed up by moving the top rate from 33 to 35 percent had to be given to the people at the bottom of it. We elected to take people off the rolls altogether. Then you have to have a 10-year expiration date, which was the one that everybody danced around. Democrats basically said we’re not going to give you the votes to get this done inside the normal processes. You have to do it under reconciliation, which requires a 10-year expiration. We wanted permanent, but they said no.

Riley: Right.

Rove: We made all those changes. We didn’t get all the votes of the people who made suggestions. This was the first big time I realized what Bush knew right from the get-go, which is that the process requires you to make concessions to people who will not accept the concession and will still vote against you. You do what they tell you to do, but they’ll still vote against it. I got this; it was even worse when—at least these people had the good sense not to go out and attack us for having done what we told him to do, as Gephardt did in the aftermath of 9/11 on the stimulus package. But nonetheless, Bush’s attitude was, I’m President; I have to try and do what we said in office. But also, it doesn’t matter what our margin was, whether it’s big or small, our obligation is to treat the opposition as the loyal opposition and seek consensus where possible.

Riley: But the starting point was still not—I mean, it was largely that we’re going to govern the way that we campaigned.

Rove: Sure, because look, what did the election say? It said the country was narrowly divided, but at the end of the day, under the Constitution, has chosen its path. It was like, there were no serious policy discussions about this, but this issue did come up and people did say, Well, is there anything that we ought not to do as a result of having had the election so close? And how can you arrive at that?

Riley: I see.

Rove: It’s an interesting mental exercise, but what in the outcome of the election says that a specific thing you said you were going to do should now no longer be pursued?

Milkis: Yes. So if he had won the popular vote by 500,000 votes, do you think you wouldn’t have had to make some of those compromises in the taxes? It seems like it.
Rove: Maybe, but maybe not. I don’t know.

Milkis: Because the Senate was still strongly divided.

Rove: The Senate was still strongly divided, but we might have had less pressure to do so. Look, I do hold the networks responsible for the absence of the popular mandate, that and the DWI. You can just draw that line: where the states to the east of it had closed their polls when the networks call Florida prematurely, and the states to the west of the line still had their polls open when the networks called Florida. And the difference in turnout improvement from 1996 is significantly better east of that line and significantly worse west of that line.

I was in the headquarters in Austin when they called it, and five minutes later our California chairman, Gerry Parsky, called me. Parsky had been a young White House aide in the Nixon years and then been very successful in business. He’s the only guy I know who commutes to his office by getting in his jet and flying from Carlsbad, California, to the Santa Monica Airport. But he was a political novice, so he picked up on things that others hadn’t. He called me just frantic, saying, “I’m getting reports all across the state that people are walking out of phone banks and walking out of the lines in front of the polling places because they’ve heard that we’ve lost Florida. Tell me we still have a chance.”

Riley: Yes.

Rove: I think this is one very bad thing the media do in trying to rush to be the first to declare a particular state.

Riley: Now, Sid, back to your question about setting the government up, staffing the White House.

Milkis: OK, yes. I don’t know; all this is interesting. Now I’m absorbed in the election again.

Riley: Exactly. Well, if you’ve got a question, don’t let me cut that off.

Milkis: I take the point on the media, but I must say I was kind of surprised how little controversy was caused by the fact that there was a distinction between the electoral vote and the popular vote. I always told my classes that if that ever happened, we’d have a constitutional amendment and we’d go to a direct popular vote. But maybe it was because so much attention was focused on Florida.

Rove: Maybe.

Milkis: I’m with Russell. I was impressed with how you were able to move ahead with your agenda; maybe it was your will. You made some compromises, but I was impressed with the fact that in spite of this thing that a lot of people like me anticipated would be very controversial, that fact in and of itself wasn’t that controversial.

Rove: Ironically enough, in the 36 days from hell, everybody who was not involved in Florida gave us a chance to move ahead on the agenda. We were behind in the normal processes that you run through the transition office, but everyone in Austin and in our McLean, Virginia, office,
was trying to keep ourselves occupied, and thinking about what we would do once we got Bush into office. We were all trying to keep ourselves occupied, and there was plenty to do to prepare. This put everybody in the mindset of what is it that we promised we’d do? What are the things necessary to begin doing those things?

Riley: How was the candidate himself holding up during that recount period?

Rove: Reading a lot and calm.

Milkis: What was he reading? Anything related, or just novels, beach novels?

Rove: He reads a lot more nonfiction than fiction. I can’t remember what he was reading at the time, but he was spending a lot of time at the ranch.

Milkis: Lewis Gould stuff?

Rove: Spending time at the ranch, particularly since in Austin, the Governor’s mansion is right on the street, and the Governor lives in a 2,000-square-foot apartment on the second floor. The mansion was surrounded by warring armies of protestors. Republicans are horribly outnumbered in Travis County, but when they found there were people chanting bad things about President-elect Bush around the mansion, all these Republicans started showing up every day to surround the Governor’s mansion with good karma. They were led by an Austin Republican, the Travis County Republican chairman, who’s a great friend of mine, a Jewish business guy who’s made his money with a chain of haircut shops. So Governor Bush spent most of the time at his Crawford ranch.

Milkis: What should we talk about in the last few minutes?

Riley: We touched on this yesterday. What did you think you would do after you won?

Milkis: You said there was some thought about whether you would even go.

Rove: Oh, yes. I was very serious.

Milkis: So tell us, take us through that.

Rove: First of all, I wasn’t spending a lot of time thinking about it, because—

Milkis: You were in hell.

Rove: I was in hell and could not get out. But even afterward, if I was going to go, I didn’t need to figure out what I would do in the White House. That’s exactly the stuff I’m bad at. “Mr. President, I need to be in charge of the—” So it was unspoken that he’d figure it out. I especially didn’t want to think about it, because I wasn’t even certain I wanted to go.

Riley: Right.

Rove: So I wasn’t thinking about it until afterward, until we had a conversation where I told him, “I’m not certain I want to go. I’m not good at that kind of internecine battles.” What Andy told
me scared me, and I didn’t want to go up there and spend an unpleasant year or two getting carved up in the internecine disputes in the West Wing that I’m ill-suited for. It was comforting when he said, “Don’t worry about it. I saw what happened in Reagan’s administration, I saw what happened to Dad’s administration, and trust me, it’s just not going to happen.”

Riley: Yes?

Rove: I developed a healthy respect for his ability to run the Governor’s office. So if he was aware of the problem, I was somehow confident he’d resolve the problem.

Riley: So there was no thought that you might follow Lee Atwater’s lead and go run the party?

Rove: If he had said to me, “This is what I want you to do,” I would have done it, but I didn’t have a burning desire to do it. I’m sort of like the cork bobbing on the water at that point. I was going to go wherever the line took me, and I was comfortable leaving it up to him.

Riley: OK.

Rove: After he said, “I know what you’re talking about,” if he had said to me, “Oh, well, that never happens,” I would have said to myself, “It’s going to happen.” But when he said, “I’ve seen it. I know what it did to Reagan’s White House; I know what it did to my dad’s administration; and I’m not going to let it happen,” it said to me that he’s been thinking about this and he will make it not so.

Riley: When he talks with you, how does he tell you what it is that he wants to do? Does he tell you what the position is, or did he say, this functionally is what I want you to do? We’ll figure out how to define your job.

Rove: Right. He said, “I want you to come with me and I want you to give me advice. I depend on your counsel and I want you to keep giving it to me. I know how you’re not just a pol, you’re a propeller head. I get it, and I want smart people around.” I don’t know if it’s then or later, but he says, “I want you to do the politics, but your job is to keep the politics away from me. I want you first and foremost there to give me advice on the job that we’ve got to do, and I want to make certain we do what we said we would do on the campaign trail. The politics of it, you’ll be in charge of that, but your job is to not make it the center of the West Wing, but to keep it out of the West Wing.”

Milkis: Was there discussion about policy?

Rove: Oh, yes.

Milkis: Because that’s what’s really different, innovative about it, as I studied the development of the Executive Office. That’s what’s really different about your position, is that you connected politics and policy, so to speak.

Rove: Right, yes. And look, he’s not very precise about it then, except it’s going to be substantive, it will be about big things, and I want you to give advice. He’s clearly talking to Andy about it, and Andy’s a little bit—this is where Cheney gives me the advice that you need to
be aware that you’re going to unsettle people in the West Wing because of your relationship with Bush. I take that as his subtle way of saying your boss is Andy Card, and Andy’s going to be unsettled by your relationship with Bush, so be aware of it. He’s a little bit, as Cheney is on many things, more circumspect than blunt. But I took his advice as remember you work for somebody, and that somebody is going to be worried that you’ve got a relationship with the President.

Riley: So Andy was already in the mix.

Rove: Bush had already said—

Milkis: He was already designated Chief of Staff.

Rove: In fact, I think it was even before the election that Bush says, “This is what I want Andy to do.”

Riley: So that piece is already in place when you go in?

Milkis: Were you comfortable with Andy Card being Chief of Staff?

Rove: Yes.

Milkis: You thought he was good?

Rove: Absolutely. Take just the convention. He did a masterful job there and again, you’re parachuting someone in three months before an event that has been in the planning and operation for 18 months. Easy to offend people, yet Andy changed the convention to fit our needs and did so in a way that left everyone happy. That bespoke real leadership skills.

Riley: Were there any resentments within the existing networks of Bush people at the idea that this guy who had been on the outside was going to come in and basically be running the White House?

Rove: There might have been.

Riley: We’re out of time, so I want to thank you again for being with us for these two days.